# Decadence in the Late Novels of Henry James

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# 'The Historic Muse': On *The Ambassadors*

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*The Ambassadors* explores the dynamics of 'double consciousness,' a complex pulsation of 'detachment in zeal' and 'curiosity in indifference' (56), which in a different frame of discourse might be called ambivalence. Psychic experience, with its charge of ambivalence, is refracted culturally, through the double prism of the international theme. The psycho-cultural field of force generated through the international polarity yields the first fully realized expression of fin-de-siecle subjectivity in the Jamesian corpus.

The cross-cultural matrix, polarizing Europe and America, stages an encounter between archetypal modes of cultural experience - between what is conceived as a 'Catholic' culture of matter and a 'Protestant' culture of spirit. Matter is associated, here, with archetypal constructions of maternity and femininity, which serve as objects of profoundly ambivalent desire. In the spirit of Henry Adams's *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904), Catholic Europe is projected as a conflicted cultural arena where the ideal symbolized in the virginity of the Virgin vies with a rich tradition of eroticized femininity. The densely communal, sensuous element of Catholic Europe is played off against the dissociative vision and the subjective proclivity of the American Puritan tradition: introverted, dematerialized and desexualized.

The imaginative recursion in the late novels to historical, Catholic Europe finds expression in a symbolic pattern, whose imagistic elements are encoded in the compositional 'germ' of *The Ambassadors*, the scene at Gloriani's garden (Preface, 33-4).[1] Lambert Strether, of Woollett, Massachusetts, a widower 'in the afternoon of life' (91,272), revisits Paris, and falls under the spell of the old world. His unexpected enchantment





is painfully mixed with the sense that for him, at this time, it is 'just simply too late' (214) - that he has forfeited his share of essential experience. This sense of privation is expressed in a gastronomic conceit, properly Parisian:

> The affair - I mean the affair of life - couldn't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at best a tin mould, either fluted or embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured - so that one 'takes' the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it. Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don't be, like me, without the memory of that illusion.
>
> (215)

It is worth noting, in the first place, how attenuated the conception of *individual* consciousness seems to be here; the fluid of the mind is universal, common to all, and the diversity of its molds is amenable to typological classification. With the development of the figure, the initial dualistic sense of matter and mind, frame and consciousness, container and contained, is resolved into a unity: the raw is converted into cooked, the crudity of separateness refined into a subtle synthesis. The self in old-world culture is a kind of *'consommation'* (122), an item on a menu, nourishing a culture whose civilizing agency is closely allied to its culinary flair.

In Europe, the forms of culinary, aesthetic and cultural consumption are forms of passional experience, which resonates at various levels with a Christian vision of sacrifice. A vision of the Passion is wrought into the fabric of the novel, and informs its structural design. Through the evocative presence of the Parisian Notre Dame, the perfect chiasmus of the novel's 'hourglass structure' (AN, 137) becomes linked with the cruciform shape of a Gothic cathedral. Notre Dame in *The Ambassadors* anticipates the elaborate architectural symbolism of the later novels; it is an imaginative precursor of the Palazzo Leporelli, the Pagoda and the Ivory Tower. Here, evoking the archetypes of Christ and the Virgin, it serves to focus a polarized experience of the body, as both mangled and virginal. The novel explores and elaborates this fraught, paradoxical sense of corporeality.

Recent scholarship has placed the theological veins in the late fiction in rich biographical and socio-cultural contexts.[2] Here, without going over the ground that has been covered, the tenor of James's response to old-world religious forms is worth attending to. The *Autobiography* speaks of a youthful 'detachment of sensibility' (Ab, 198) from the private theological

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speculation of the Elder Henry James. The son's 'dissociation' is coupled with a yearning, spelled out elsewhere in the memoir, for full-bodied forms of worship. As against his father's leaning toward 'the abstract,' he himself wished for 'a state of faith, a conviction of the Divine, an interpretation of the universe - anything one might have made bold to call it - which would have supplied more features or appearances,' a more commonplace sense of 'social and material crowdedness' (Ab, 337-8).

In *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875), his early record of European travel, James contrasts the personal, embodied appeal of Catholic art with the passionless tradition of 'western heresy.' The 'terribly distinct Apostles' at the medieval church of Torcello strike him as 'intensely personal sentinels of a personal Deity. Their stony stare seems to wait for ever vainly for some visible revival of primitive orthodoxy, and one may well wonder whether it finds much beguilement in idly-gazing troops of Western heretics - passionless even in their heresy' (IH, 77-8). In the Milanese Basilica of St Ambrose, 'with its spacious atrium and its crudely solemn mosaics,' he feels that 'it is surely your own fault if you don't forget Dr. Strauss and M. Renan and worship as grimly as a Christian of the ninth century' (IH, 130).

In the Hawthorne biography (1879), James bemoans the things that are 'absent from the texture of American life': 'No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy [...], no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches [...]' (LC I, 351-2).[3] Two decades later, *The Ambassadors* seeks to recover this very texture of medieval, Catholic Europe. The novel inhabits an acutely modern moment, yet strives, as a kind of latter-day ritual vehicle, to conjure back a lost plenitude of experience, a real presence of the old faith.

## II

With the eschewal of narrative ambiguity and the resurgence of the international subject, the reflective center of *The Ambassadors* is projected into an imaginative arena of history and culture. The insular integrity of the vessel of consciousness, so jealously guarded in *The Sacred Fount*, is sacrificed, and the individual mind abandons itself to the influence of what T. S. Eliot, after Matthew Arnold, called 'the mind of Europe' (TIT, 29). In terms of the cultural polarity of the international subject, 'the mind of Europe' is juxtaposed with the isolationist, abstractionist American spirit; the interknit communal element of Catholic Europe is brought to bear on the introspective vision and the subjective proclivity of the Puritan American tradition.



Strether comes to Paris as a vessel of the old New England spirit, the Puritan 'sacred rage' (85), congealed now into moral dogmatism. His journey hovers uneasily between imaginative domains of the past and the future. He is a 'missionary' of Mrs Newsome, 'the lady of Woollett' (219, 303) and his literary patroness, a wealthy widow whom he expects to marry on his return. His mission is to 'save' (Preface, 43) her prodigal son from the snares of an old-world temptress, and restore him to his duties in the new world; Chad Newsome is called on to take charge of the new advertising section of the family industry.

The sacred rage of Woollett is an atrophied form - 'gentrified,' in Santayana's sense - of a once fervent idealism; with the genteel tradition itself, it is increasingly eroded through vulgar association with the marketplace. The commodity manufactured by the Woollett industry remains pointedly nameless, 'indeed unnamable' (98). The family fortune is an undignified 'new sum'; 'Woollett,' in this connection, is a 'wallet,' and Jim Pocock *{peacock* vain?), a prosperous businessman and Chad's brother-in-law, a 'pocket.' These receptacles and their contents, like the 'pocket' Mrs Pocock uses for her moral transactions in Paris (341), are both abstract and highly material. Chad's professional prospects are satirized, no doubt, but in a spirit that discloses areas of earnest conflict.[4]

The idiom of modernity employed in relation to Woollett forges a complex link between professional achievement and a fully crystallized sense of self. Strether's attachment to Mrs Newsome is fueled by anxious desire to preserve his 'one presentable little scrap of identity' (101), vouchsafed by her - the editorship of the glossy Woollett Review, which, though unmarketable, nonetheless belongs to the culture of the market. The novel finds ways, to which I turn in greater detail later, of exploring the modern juncture of self and profession. For the moment, it may be well to linger with the counter-stress, which invests Mrs Newsome, a latter-day muse of mechanical reproduction, with archaic authority - the authority of a feudal lady with an errant knight in her service, or a queen commanding a counselor and envoy. She comes to be figured as a type of Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen (90) - 'a moral swell,' cold and handsome (90, 102), and still with 'the girdle of a maid' (323). By way of antithesis, Strether pictures the Europeanized Maria Gostrey as Mary Stuart (90-1), Catholic and passionate.[5] Against the backdrop of French Catholicism, however, Maria evokes the plainness and limpidity of Dutch Protestantism. She offers Strether a secluded refuge, a 'retreat,' 'a haunt of ancient peace/ dedicated to time-honored amenities - 'to

pleasant knowledge, to intimate charm, to antique order, to a neatness that was almost august.' The descriptive focus on the display in her dining room of small old crockery, ideally kept pewter and specimens of vivid Delft (507), is a gentle parody of Dutch and Flemish genre painting.

At the behest of the lady of Woollett, then, Strether is sent to Europe to resume the Puritan 'quarrel with Eve' (MSMC, 261). Maria Gostrey, a partial incarnation of the archetypal old-world woman, crosses his path en route, at Chester, but fails to arouse in him the historical spirit of combat.[6] She is an expatriate, socially unanchored, but permeated with a passion for social classification; 'the mistress of a hundred cases or categories, receptacles of the mind, subdivisions for convenience,' she pigeonholes 'her fellow mortals with a hand as free as that of a compositor scattering type' (60). Her store of experience turns her, for Strether, into a true daughter of Eve; it has 'the effect of appearing to place *all knowledge* [...] *on this original woman's side'* (68; my italics).

The 'types of Woollett,' he comes to feel, are two exactly, 'the male and the female,' while the types of Europe are diverse, marked by 'a series of strong stamps' applied on them 'as if from without' (92). The rigid bipolar typology of Woollett comes close to suggesting that the two types do not fully mix with each other. The typology of Europe, of course, is of a different order. In Paris, Strether finds the prodigal Chad uncannily improved - palpably transformed by 'a miracle almost monstrous' (178); the uncouth youth, now prematurely silver-haired, has turned into a suave cosmopolite, with the inveterate savoir faire of 'a social animal' (265). Chad's case seems to expose the 'strong stamps' of old-world culture as the stigmata of a life of passion. The European 'types' are marked by their carnality, which, as James's imagery implies, is a condition not free from suffering; it resonates typologically with the Passion of Christ and the Virgin.

The 'prime producing cause' (173) of the miracle seems to burn with the civilizing passion of the ancient queens of France - a passion which Henry Adams describes as a type of the Virgin's love. So,

> while the Virgin was miraculously using the power of spiritual love to elevate and purify the people, Eleanor [of Guienne] and her daughters were using the power of earthly love to discipline and refine the Courts [...]. [Their ideals] were a form of religion, and if you care to see its evangels you had best go directly to Dante and Petrarch, or, if you like it better, to Don Quijote de la Mancha [...]. Eleanor and her daughter Mary and her granddaughter Blanche knew as well as St Bernard knew, or St Francis, what a brute the emancipated man could be; and as though they foresaw the society of the sixteenth and eighteenth century, they used every terror they could invent as well as every tenderness they could invoke, to tame the beasts around them.
>
> (MSMC, 201)



Marie de Vionnet, whose civilizing influence Chad seems to have absorbed physically, lives in separation from her husband, the brutish Count de Vionnet. Divorce is not to be thought of, and it follows that 'short of a catastrophe' (372), the countess and Chad have no matrimonial prospects. Strether, in defiance of Woollett opinion, teaches himself to think of their attachment as 'virtuous.'

The chiasmus traced by the crisscrossing plot lines involves a symmetrical reversal of original positions: Chad leans increasingly toward Woollett and business, while Strether, converted to the 'Religion of Europe,' abandons the cause of the lady of Woollett for the sake of the lady of Paris. He holds his ground as a grand 'tribute to the ideal' (369), until the 'virtuous attachment' is revealed to him, traumatically, as sexual.

## Ill

Strether's initiation into the religion of Europe, with its mysterious, tormenting core of sexual passion, is prepared for by Maria Gostrey. Maria is a 'general guide' to the European labyrinth - it is a 'fate,' she says, a predestined vocation to which she has abandoned herself (65). She sacrificially bears on her back 'the load of our national consciousness, or, in other words - for it comes to that - of our nation itself. Of what is our nation composed but of men and women individually on my shoulders?' (66). Her 'innermost mission and use' is to minister to her compatriots' repatriation; she sends them back 'spent' (78), depleted by passions. She herself is forever on the brink of being converted or consumed - always at the mercy of 'some familiar appetite in ambush, jumping out as she approached, yet appeasable with a temporary biscuit' (79). She is a temporary substitute, a *ficelle* or bit of string, caught between two worlds, old and new, in a kind of ceaseless purgatorial vacillation.[7]

To Waymarsh, a lawyer from Milrose, Massachusetts, and Strether's traveling companion, she appears in a less ambiguous light. With his predisposition for judgment, a Puritan's low tolerance for intermediacies and intercessions, he sees in her a personification of historical Europe,

> a Jesuit in petticoats, a representative of the recruiting interests of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church, for Waymarsh - that was to say the enemy, the monster of bulging eyes and far-reaching quivering

> groping tentacles - was exactly society, exactly the multiplication of Shibboleths, exactly the discrimination of type and tones, exactly the wicked old Rows of Chester, rank with feudalism; exactly in short Europe.
>
> (81-2)[8]

Strether's 'inward picture' of Chester is more subtle and perturbing, and it too colors and is colored by the presence of their guide:

> The tortuous wall - girdle long since snapped, of the little swollen city, held half in place by careful civic hands - wanders in narrow file between parapets, smoothed by peaceful generations, pausing here and there for a dismantled gate or a bridged gap, with rises and droops, steps up and steps down, queer twists, queer contacts [...].
>
> (64)

His anxiety with respect to Maria tends to surface in figures of shadowy architectural spaces. Her rooms in the Quartier Marboeuf are like the profane 'temple' of a collector, 'the innermost nook of a shrine - as brown as a pirate's cave' (141). On one occasion, he feels 'the pure flame of the disinterested,' which burns 'in her cave of treasures as a lamp in a Byzantine vault' (367). There is about her a sense of medieval or eastern mystique, in part incongruous and ironized; she might be a bourgeois descendant of Mary the Gypsy, or of Esmeralda in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831).

Notre Dame Cathedral, however, is associated primarily with Marie de Vionnet, Maria's girlhood friend; it is Marie, not Maria, who brings out in full Strether's archetypal vision of the old-world woman. In the Preface, this vision is rendered indirectly, through imagery of vessel and fluid. Strether's original state, before his Parisian conversion, 'might have been figured by a clear green liquid, say, in a neat glass phial; and the liquid, once poured into the open cup of *application,* once exposed to the reaction of *another air,* had begun to turn from green to red, or whatever, and might, for all he knew, be on its way to purple, to black, to yellow' (Preface, 40; my italics).

It emerges that the air of Paris is not altogether a breathing medium; it has the materiality of things consumed, 'a taste as of something mixed with art, something that presented nature as a white-capped master-chef (111). The art of consumption and the consumption of art, the two matrices of French culture, are present here to the exclusion of other forms of experience - to the exclusion, above all, of the vast open



spaces of the American wilderness. Parisian nurture, alimentary and artistic, carries with it an anxiety over being smothered or devoured.

Paris in *The Ambassadors* is essentially another name for the archetypal *parisienne.* The transfused liquid of the mind, with its 'violent variability' (40), is intimately associated with her presence. A hint of violence lurks in name 'Vionnet'; we think of the countess as *'violee,'* but her own temperament, too, is 'both sensitive and violent' (223). She is a creature of infinite variety - 'various and multiform,' like Shakespeare's Cleopatra (256).[9] She is a type of Venus, too, 'half mythological and half conventional,' 'a goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud,' or 'a sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge' (256). Above all, she is a type of the medieval Virgin as Adams projects her - the Virgin perceived as the last and greatest, 'the most varied in character,' of a series of pagan goddesses - Astarte, Isis, Demeter, Aphrodite (MSMC, 187, 267).

On his arrival, Paris presents itself to Strether in the image of a scintillating *femme du monde:*

> It hung before him [...], the vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next.
>
> (118)

In *The Ambassadors,* as in the novels that follow, jewels and ornaments function emblematically. The high respectability of Mrs Newsome's 'ruche' contrasts with the quaintness of Maria's 'antique jewel,' pendant on a red velvet band. The value of the jewel is uncertain, though Strether is 'complacently sure' of it (90). Madame de Vionnet wears a 'collar of large old Emeralds,' whose worth becomes inestimable, we sense, through physical contact with her; the green seeps into her silvery garb of silk and crape, and is 'more dimly repeated, at other points of her apparel, in embroidery, in enamel, in satin, in substances and textures vaguely rich.' Her head, in turn, has an argent quality, suggesting 'a notion of the antique, on an old precious medal, some silver coin of the Renaissance' (256). The house in the Rue de Bellechasse figures in this sense as a jewel-case *('chasse'),* holding a priceless object.

The house is a historical monument of the private order, suffused with

> some glory, some prosperity of the First Empire, some Napoleonic glamour, some dim lustre of the great legend; elements clinging still

to all the consular chairs and mythological brasses and sphinxes' heads and faded surfaces of satin striped with alternate silk.

The place itself went further back - that he guessed, and how old Paris continued in a way to echo there. But the post-revolutionary period, the world he vaguely thought of as the world of Chateaubriand, of Madame de Stael, even of the young Lamartine, had left its stamp on harps and urns and torches, a stamp impressed on sundry small objects, ornaments and relics.

Ranged in glass cabinets, at once highly private and highly public, the relics seem almost to include the hostess, who appears 'beautifully passive under the spell of transmission' (235-6). She rests, however, in the eye of a storm, at the still center of historical turbulence; her house is haunted by historical phantoms, the ghost of the Empire, its 'faint far-away cannon-roar' (361).

Our sense of Mme de Vionnet is informed throughout by historical archetypes. The typicality of the minted image on the silver coin bears out the historical typicality of the image of the woman. She embodies and is embodied by an encased jewel, an heirloom or a precious relic, as well as, variously, the historical city itself, and the vaulting interior of a church.

Maria Gostrey pictures her as St Peter's Basilica in Rome. In their school days, Marie was 'dazzlingly, though quite booklessly clever; as polyglot as a little Jewess (which she wasn't, oh no!) and chattering French, English, German, Italian, anything one would [...].' Thanks to this linguistic facility, she is one of the 'types' whom one may conveniently approach in one's native English, 'who don't keep you explaining - minds with doors as numerous as the many-tongued cluster of confessionals at Saint Peter's. You might confess to her with confidence in Roumelian, and even Roumelian sins.' (224) The passage glides from language to mind, from verbal mediation to immediate, sacral Presence. Linguistic facility blends into psychological penetration, turning, at last, into a kind of Pentecostal grace, and an unorthodox priestly investiture.[10]

The contrast between the sheer typicality, to Strether's ear, of her French - a Romance vernacular imbued with the mysteries of her faith - and the idiosyncrasies of her English, springs to mind in this connection. Her French has the effect of

fairly veiling her identity, shifting her back into a mere voluble class or race to the intense audibility of which he was by this time inured. When she spoke the charming slightly strange English he best knew her by he seemed to feel her as a creature, among all the millions, with a language quite to herself, the real monopoly of a special shade of speech, beautifully easy to her, yet of a color and a cadence that were both inimitable and matters of accident.

(464)

This, of course, is an aspect of her Strether alone can unveil, an aspect peculiar to his relation with her, and which meets his peculiar need; it would be lost in her silent, mystic exchanges with Chad, in their moments of extreme intimacy (466). Mme de Vionnet is, above all, perfectly adaptable; her mind is a universal receptacle of individual irregularities and differences, like a 'many-tongued cluster of confessionals.'

The figure, we may note, is intensely physical; it seems to conjure an uncanny vision of the oral cavity. Recalling the image of the city as a 'vast bright Babylon,' we may be tempted to think of the multiplicity of languages in scriptural terms, as a sign of humanity's distance from the divine. Mme de Vionnet's bodily mind, however, is a kind of nave, a vessel in the architectural sense - a receiving womb, where languages cease to signify and the mind merges with primal Matter, not in verbal communication, but in a fantasy of alimentary communion. This quality of sheer receptiveness has its counterpart in the figuration of the Virgin as the Triclinium, the 'Refectory of the Trinity.' According to Adams, the medieval Trinity is wholly subsumed in the Virgin; 'Chartres represents, not the Trinity, but the identity of the Mother and Son. The Son represents the Trinity, which is thus absorbed in the Mother' (MSMC, 95, 200).

Strether is drawn to Notre Dame Cathedral, the site of his first fateful encounter with Mme de Vionnet, in a spirit of longing for absorption and assimilation.

The great church had no altar for his worship, no direct voice for his soul; but it was none the less soothing even to sanctity; for he could feel while there what he couldn't elsewhere, that he was a plain tired man, taking the holiday he had earned. He was tired, but he wasn't plain - that was the pity and the trouble of it; he was able, however, to drop his problem at the door very much as if it had been the copper piece that he deposited, on the threshold, in the receptacle of the inveterate blind beggar. He trod the long dim nave, sat in the splendid choir, paused before the clustered chapels, and the mighty monument laid upon him its spell.

(272)

Soon the prolonged stillness of a lady-worshipper in a side-chapel, her back turned to him, attracts his notice.

> She only sat and gazed before her, as he himself often sat. But she had placed herself, as he never did, within the focus of the shrine, and she had lost herself, he could easily see, as he should only have liked to do. She was not a wandering alien, keeping back more than she gave, but one of the familiar, the intimate, the fortunate, for whom these dealings had a method and a meaning.
>
> (274)

The meeting that follows leads to a *dejeuner* of *omelette aux tomates* and strawberry-colored *Chablis* in another 'place of pilgrimage for the knowing' (277), dedicated, like the cathedral, to rites of alimentary communion. Strether, his carefully cultivated reserve dispelled in a 'smash' (279), gives in fully now to his companion's charm. His surrender issues in a profession of faith in the 'virtuous attachment' - a giddy experience, rendered in a figure whose resonance is grotesquely alimentary: he feels the situation running away with him, and is able to recall the moment of its having 'taken the bit in its teeth' (279).

The keen sensuous detail in which the meal is rendered evokes something of the vivid, unselfconscious character of the medieval, as it might figure for a romancer like Hugo. The work of Hugo provides a frame, notably, for the earlier scene of recognition in the cathedral. When the dim worshipper at the chapel, risen from her meditation, approaches Strether in the nave, he is mentally occupied with a recent purchase of the Hugovian corpus in 70 bound volumes,

> a miracle of cheapness, he was assured by the shopman, at the price of the red-and-gold alone. He looked doubtless, while he played his eternal nippers over Gothic glooms, sufficiently rapt in reverence; but what his thought had finally bumped against was the question of where, among packed accumulations, so multiform a wedge would be able to enter. Were seventy volumes in red-and-gold to be perhaps what he should most substantially have to show at Woollett as the fruit of his mission?
>
> (274)

He mentions 'the great romancer and the great romance' to her, as well as his purchase of the 'blazing' collection. As he speaks, this expensive 'plunge' and its blaze merge into his experience, now, of 'plunging' with her (276); the ironic notion of a pricey and illusive romance inflects the sense in which she becomes 'romantic for him, far beyond what she could have guessed' (275). Through and against this filter of



irony, 'Gothic glooms' are able to rise to the surface of the scene at the restaurant, with peculiar intensity. 'Ancient proverbs' sound 'in the tone of their words and the clink of their glasses, in the hum of the town and the plash of the river. It *was* clearly better to suffer as a sheep than as a lamb. One might as well perish by sword as by famine' (280).

The momentary intrusion of free indirect thought, here, suggests the invasion of consciousness by the archaic experience of a culture. The first proverb is a garbled, Christianized version of 'As well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.' The hanging, implicitly, is the suffering of the lamb, Christ's passion on the Cross. Here, however, one suffers as a sheep, in the fullness of physical maturity; communion in Christ is transformed, in an inchoate fantasy, into erotic communion. The second proverb, surfacing for the second time (138), is part of a larger figural pattern, which associates Puritan Woollett with a dearth of nutrition, and Catholic Paris with violent physical contact (the sword), projected as cookery and consumption.

In the cathedral, Strether is able to persuade himself of Mme de Vionnet's 'innocence.' Churchgoing in a state of unconfessed sin, only 'to flaunt an insolence of guilt,' is a flagrancy irreconcilable with his sense of her delicacy (276). Still, for the Protestant imagination, devotional contradiction is the very element of historical Catholicism. The image of Paris as Woman and Jewel, 'the vast bright Babylon,' is a playful allusion, not free from anxiety, to the whore of Babylon in Revelation, 'arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornications' (17:4). The Reformers, of course, identified this lurid figure with the Old Faith. In Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the Catholic Church figures as the treacherous Fidessa, 'clad in scarlet red / Purfled with gold and perle of rich essay' (1.111-12).

## IV

The late fiction draws on imaginative patterns which situate femininity within a paradoxical sphere, yoking together a fantasy of bodily intactness and carnality. James's frail female vessels are always in danger of cracking under the pressure of this vision. In *The Ambassadors*, the most sonorous instance of such a 'smash' is Sarah Pocock's public appearance, near the end of her Parisian sojourn, in a crimson dress. The sight affects Strether, synesthetically, 'as the sound of a fall through a skylight' (390); the synesthetic effect suggests a sudden bewildering synthesizing perception of a New England woman as a sexual being.

Henry Adams saw the Church of the Virgin as a doctrinal anomaly, built not upon a rock, as it were, but on a frail crystal. It is purely magical while it stands, since, like the crystal bowl in James's last novel, it is internally cleft. Adams speaks of the *mirabilia* of the cult of the Virgin as the only 'crack and cranny' in the orthodoxy of the Church 'through which human frailty could hope to escape' (MSMC, 238).

Mme de Vionnet is fully possessed of, and possessed by, this magical vulnerability. Strether's faith in her virtue rests on the 'odd foundation' of her beauty (496) - the beauty which is her very frailty. Her sublimity, like the Virgin's, is all too human. In Adams's terms, 'The Mother alone was human, imperfect and could love; she alone was Favour, Dualism, Diversity [...]. If the Trinity was in its essence unity, the Mother alone could represent whatever was not Unity; whatever was irregular, exceptional, outlawed; and this was the whole human race' (MSMC, 248).

Such irregularity is the 'sharp rupture of an identity' whereby Chad, to Strether's sense, is converted into 'somebody else' (154). Chad's transformation has left an imprint on his body, whose effects, here attenuated and domesticated, are darkly reminiscent of the Sacred Fount principle. He is prematurely aged, while Mme de Vionnet, the mother of a marriageable daughter who cannot be 'an hour less than thirty-eight' (222), is in the very flower of youth, capable of looking only 20, 'as young as a little girl' (403). This uncanny configuration is associated, again, with the dyad of the Virgin and Christ: the Son wastes away in body, while the Mother flourishes in unconsumed virginity, like the typological Burning Bush in Genesis. At the same time, Chad remains an 'irreducible young Pagan' (170), and Mme de Vionnet an earthly vessel of sexuality.

'Chad,' a name whose resonance with 'cad' has been noted (JSRE, 87), is also Welsh for 'battle.' On the occasion of Strether's last visit with Mme de Vionnet, the 'smell of blood' around the house in the Rue de Bellechasse, a sensuous correlative to her exposed adultery, recalls the description in the Preface of literary composition as a 'hunt' *('chasse')*. The pursuit of 'the unseen and the occult' elements of the scheme, as by 'the clinging scent of the gage [...] already in hand,' is as exciting, says James, as any 'dreadful old pursuit of the hidden slave with bloodhounds and the rag of association' (Preface, 37). In a similar vein, on his first visit to Chad's rooms on Boulevard Malesherbes, Strether imagines he can 'sniff 'the charming scent' of a woman's influence (131).[11]

*'Chasse'* in the sense of pursuit threatens to merge here with the object pursued, *'chasse'* in the sense of jewel case or reliquary. For Strether, therefore, the pursuit takes place at a distance from itself. At the culminant moment of his occult chase, when Mme de Vionnet is



undermined by 'the strange strength of her passion' (482), it is 'as if he didn't think of her at all, as if he could think of nothing but the passion, mature, abysmal, pitiful, she represented, and the possibilities she betrayed' (483). His fraught sense of the dissolution of the contours of identity in abysmal 'passion' emerges through and against emotional dissociation. She strikes him then as suddenly older, and for all her cultivation, 'as vulgarly troubled [...] as a maidservant crying for her young man.' It is here, however, that she comes most to resemble Cleopatra, who in the absence of Antony is 'No more but e'en a woman, and commanded / by such poor passion as the maid that milks / and does the meanest chares' (IV.xv.78-80).

Adrian Poole writes that Strether is faced here with what he has been in search of all along: 'The sign of passion, and specifically of a woman's passion, that is at once, it seems, the cause and the consequence of desire. To put it too brutally, he has wanted to see a woman suffer [...]' (HJ, 55). The encounter taps into a half-buried violent reality, but at the same time, not unlike the staged scene of Cleopatra's death, partakes in the order of *'panem et circenses'* (197). It is of the very element of Paris, which Strether perceives, on one occasion, as the stage of a vast 'parade of the circus' (340). A form of spectacle, albeit private, a sacrificial display which both solicits and bars the viewer's participation.

In the passionate deadlock Strether is made to witness, Mme de Vionnet is brutalized by Chad, and Chad, in turn, is preyed upon by his passion. He *cleaves* to her to the death, he says, 'and one can't but have it before one, in the cleaving - the point where the death comes in' (505). The antithetical meaning of 'cleaving' echoes in his reiteration of the word. Chad seems to be speaking, as directly as he can, of his *cachet*, the complex dissociative experience of a man 'marked out by the women' (167). The dissociation of his character is figured in a sinister conceit, where the image of 'the mangle' serves to evoke unavowed domestic violence: 'He 'put out' his excitement, or whatever other emotion the matter involved, as he put out his washing; than which no arrangement could make more for domestic order. It was quite, in short, for Strether himself to feel a personal analogy with the laundress bringing home the triumphs of the mangle' (428).

Mme de Vionnet, variously a Venus rising from the waves, a sea nymph, a sponge and a drowning Ophelia (481-2), is, as James said of George Sand, invariably 'liquid' (LC II, 980). Her linguistic fluency is an essential aspect of this quality; language of a certain complexion and texture is, it seems, capable of being invested with primary orality and corporeality. Here, the 'putting out' of soiled clothes and the 'triumphs of the

mangle,' strange rituals in which Strether obscurely officiates, carry a bodily, erotic resonance. In this world, sexual passion happens darkly, in impenetrable privacy, outside the precincts of the impoverished, depleted life of consciousness.

Passion in Paris is a form of sacrifice, and Strether, too, undergoes a Parisian martyrdom. When the ear is attuned to this resonance, the novel seems to vibrate with the imagery of The Lamb of God. The motif is present aurally in 'Lambert'[12] and in 'Lambinet,' and typologically in 'Abel,' the late Mr Newsome. It is intimated in the name 'Woollett,' whose inhabitants are once pictured as browsing sheep, pulled up by a 'turn of [Chad's] wrist and a jerk of the far-flung noose' (172). It is picked up in the image of 'rumination' in the *salle a manger* (405) and again in the mangled proverb, 'it is better to suffer as a sheep than as a lamb.' At a late moment, Chad is witnessed languidly consuming 'roast mutton' (502), an image unlikely to go down easily for us.

Strether himself figures hyperbolically in an image-pattern of sacrifice and redemption. He is 'like a lamb' to Sarah (447), but intends to 'save' Mme de Vionnet, if he can (244). The whole thing, he predicts, will come upon him, and he will be used for it 'to the last drop of [his] blood' (373). He becomes vulnerable, 'woundable by Chad's lady, in respect to whom he had come out with such a store of indifference.' (280) He feels himself pierced by golden nails she is driving into his flesh, 'exquisitely remorseless.' (260, 285, 363) In the end, he finds he has been suffering for everyone - for Chad, for Chad's lady, and even for young Jeanne de Vionnet - Jeanne who is brashly married off, martyred like the medieval saint whose name she bears, in an appalling instance of old-world *'vieille sagesse'* (364). At the same time, he feels he must atone for his very readiness to suffer. T have been sacrificing so to strange gods,' he tells Little Bilham, 'that I feel I want to put on record, somehow, my fidelity - fundamentally unchanged after all - to our own. I feel as if my hands were embrued with the blood of monstrous alien altars - of another faith altogether' (393). Little Bilham seems to have experienced Parisian paganism in a still more radical mode: 'They've simply - the cannibals! - eaten me; converted me, if you like, but converted me into food. I'm but the bleached bones of a Christian' (205).[13]

When the nature of the 'virtuous attachment' is revealed to Strether, his Christlike predisposition emerges in its fraught relation to erotic fantasy. The 'quantity of make-believe' involved in the affair strongly disagrees with his 'spiritual stomach' (468); the coupling of passion and betrayal seems to produce in him a grotesque Eucharistic effect, a momentary fusion of spirit and flesh into bodily, organic consciousness.



From absorption in the outraged 'consciousness of that organ,' he passes into a nocturnal reverie about the lovers. 'He recognized 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.' In the poignant hybridity of tone, which is the hallmark of the novel, the grave biblical cadence conjures up lost labors of *love,* the complex erotic play of Shakespearean comedy.

In the wake of the disclosure, Strether feels himself 'mixed up with the typical tale of Paris' (472), a tale of passion and communion which seems to pervade, oppressively, the atmosphere of the Parisian public center of communication, the General Post Office. The fabulous 'special' quality of the 'virtuous attachment' (372) and, correspondingly, his own sense of specialty in its presence, give way to a sense of commonality and commonness.

At their final interview, Mme de Vionnet attributes to Strether a Christlike ethos of sacrifice: T don't pretend you feel yourself victimized, for this is evidently the way you live, and it's what - we agreed - is the best way' (483). His recoil from the depths of passion she embodies is a retreat, above all, from the common, all-too-human order of victimization. Her passion, as he perceives it, renders her tragically vulnerable; it associates itself with divinity and infinity, yet doomed to remain conflicted, deficient or 'earthly,' under the sway of the ideal.

> She had but made Chad what he was - so why should she think she had made him infinite? She had made him better, she had made him best, she had made him anything one would. But it came to our friend with supreme queerness that he was none the less only Chad. Strether had the sense that he, a little, had made him too; his high appreciation had, as it were, consecrated her work. The work, however admirable, was nevertheless of the strict human order, and in short it was marvelous that the companion of mere earthly joys, of comforts, aberrations (however one classed them) within the common experience should be so transcendently prized.

The real 'coercion' of the moment, Strether makes out, is 'to see a man ineffably adored. There it was again - it took a woman, it took a woman; if to deal with them was to walk on water what wonder that the water rose? And it had never surely risen higher than around this woman' (483). Earlier in the same passage, he has figured women as 'endlessly absorbent' (481-2). Here, the vision of Mme de Vionnet with water rising around her, followed directly by the overflow of her tears, confronts

him with her mode of erotic liquefaction. Facing her in her raw element, an aquatic creature, like a sponge - 'endlessly absorbent,' as if draining his vital fluids - he obeys a deep-seated Puritanical impulse, and withdraws into spiritual insularity. Christlike, in defiance of the laws of matter, he deals with her by 'walking on water.' The image conveys an intimate and radical rejection of her very being, an absolute refusal of mixing.

She, in turn, plays Mary Magdalene to his Christ: 'Of course, as I've said, you're acting, in your wonderful way, for yourself; and what's for yourself is no more my business - though I may reach out unholy hands so clumsily to touch it - than if it were something in Timbactoo' (483). Her words recall the *Noli Me Tangere* scene after the Resurrection: 'Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my father' (John 20:17).

The moment resonates ironically with the scene at Notre Dame Cathedral, where Strether imagines her to be seeking 'sublime support,' and wishes to grant her freedom to 'clutch' at him for help. 'Every little, in a long strain, helped, and if he happened to affect her as a firm object she could hold on by, he wouldn't jerk himself out of her reach.' And again: 'Since she took him for a firm object - much as he might to his own sense appear at times to rock - he would do his best to be one' (277).

## V

The *Noli Me Tangere* passage, with its intimate resistance to tactility, registers the tension of a 'double consciousness,' of detachment-in-zeal and curiosity-in-indifference. In terms of the typology of profession in the novel, this mode of persistent self-distancing is linked to the work of the critic, and counterpoised to the work of the artist. The latter type is emblematically portrayed in Gloriani, the illustrious old-world sculptor, who is powerful and sensual, like a 'glossy male tiger, magnificently marked' (216), and seems to draw on a reservoir of inscrutable, 'terrible' life (200). He is, however, helplessly trapped in his own molds. He resembles a beautiful bossed or minted image; in his 'medal-like' face, every line is 'an artist's own,' and time tells 'only as tone and consecration' (200). Speaking of the miracle of Chad's transformation, Strether attributes it to 'the fate that waits for one, the dark doom that rides'; this doom may appear uncanny, but really it is only 'poor dear old life' that 'springs the surprise' (178). For Gloriani, much as for Chad, life seems to have sprung a Medusa face. In pursuit of her image he has become her prey, her type, congealed and glazed over in his passion.

The critic's more guarded pursuit of art and life is intended, in this sense, to shield the finer, more vibrant elements of consciousness from



the impingements of objects. Strether is firm to the last in his refusal to see himself as the hero of his European situation (380). His conflicted movement between the worlds of Woollett and Paris places them in a single psycho-cultural sphere, as disjunctive versions of each other. We .ire made to see individual identity, at the Woollett pole, as 'woundable' in the face of 'poor dear old life' and the surprises it springs; but passions and their vicissitudes are strenuously defended against, even as they are constantly craved and courted.

Woollett, in this constellation, has severed itself from passionate living, and has thereby acquired a moral distinction, a form of high self-sufficiency. If, as Henry Adams believed, the medieval Trinity was in danger of becoming absorbed in the Virgin, at Woollett, the Virgin becomes spiritualized and absorbed in the Trinity. As against the single, suffering lady of Paris, Woollett is represented by a grotesque female Trinity. Mrs Newsome and Sarah are mother and daughter - the daughter opening 'so straight down' (352) into the mother that her matriarchal name seems to stand for both, just as 'the plural pronoun' can be made to refer to both, and exclude others (430). Mrs Newsome is 'all cold thought,' and Sarah is able to 'serve' it, 'without its really losing anything' (446). To complete the Trinity, there is 'the ghost of the lady of Woollett,' (303) made present in transatlantic letters and telegrams, as well as in silences and ruptures. With the approach of their final break, Strether experiences Mrs Newsome as 'essentially all moral pressure,' so that 'the presence of this element was almost identical with her presence. It wasn't perhaps that he felt he was dealing with her straight, but it was certainly as if she had been dealing straight with him. She was reaching him somehow by the lengthened hand of her spirit [...].' (416) Mamie Pocock, finally, emerges as a kind of female Christ; like Jeanne de Vionnet, she is a type of the martyred virgin, 'bridal' and 'blooming' without a groom (379, 382, 383), transported to Europe, it seems, to be maimed by passion.

Half-muted suggestions of Chad's sexual investment in these young women - the one his niece, the other his lover's daughter - tacitly explore fantasies of incest. Incestuous patterns surface increasingly, in the late fiction, within the orbit of 'the fundamental passions' (GB, 548). Here as elsewhere, this psychic domain is approached through archetypal imaginative filters - Christ and the Virgin, and their martyrs and saints.

Mrs Newsome, reaching out for Strether with her ghostly hand, writes profusely, when she is not defiantly silent. Under stress, she cables; her telegram summoning Strether back by the first steamer is delivered directly to the hotel, by the *pneumatic tube.* Communication with her can have a quality of dissociated immediacy, but it is always disembodied.

Her tactile sense seems neutralized or sterilized - how else could she find the glazed covers of the Woollett Review 'pleasant to touch'? (117). She herself 'won't be touched' - her 'whole moral and intellectual being or block' repels physical contact (448). Resistant to *touch,* she is also deficient in *tact.* The vulgarization in her letters of the 'virtuous attachment' could make Strether exclaim on her want of it, even if 'she couldn't at best become tactful as quickly as he. Her tact had to reckon with the transatlantic ocean, the General Post Office and the extravagant curve of the globe' (183). Indeed, the sense of the curvaceousness of the earth, with which Strether by now is on terms of easy familiarity, is as far beyond the reach of the imagination of Woollett as are the tact and tactility of Paris.

For a time, their correspondence thrives on their differences, for 'what was after all more natural than that it should become more frequent just in proportion as their problem became more complicated?' (246). At bottom, however, Strether is averse to explanations, and tormented by the frenzy of correspondence they generate:

> No one could explain better when needful, nor put more conscience into an account or a report; which burden of consciousness is perhaps exactly the reason why his heart always sank when the clouds of explanation gathered. His highest ingenuity was in keeping the sky of life clear of them. Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he held that nothing ever was in fact - for any one else - explained. One went through the vain motions, but it was mostly a waste of life. A personal relation was a relation only so long as people either perfectly understood or, better still, didn't care if they didn't. From the moment they cared if they didn't it was living by the sweat of one's brow.
>
> (153)

Mme de Vionnet, by contrast, does not 'keep you explaining'; her mind, we recall, is as receptive as 'the many-tongued cluster of confessionals at Saint Peter's.' While Mrs Newsome transcends embodiment, Mme de Vionnet, 'endlessly absorbent,' transmutes the ordinary uses of language into bodily experience. For Strether (to say nothing of James), 'living by the sweat of one's brow' is, precisely, writing - writing as an ongoing, painstaking affirmation of individual identity in the pursuit of a vocation. The kind of effortless living associated with Mme de Vionnet is a twofold negation, of labor and of self - a state of undifferentiated being, preclusive of individuating action. Mme de Vionnet is powerfully associated with a venerable and highly evolved civilization; yet she also represents a form of radical passivity, which embodies the very principle of opposition to



Woollett entrepreneurship; she keeps her lover absorbed in her, and thus cut off from the industrious life Woollett would consign him to.

More broadly, the economy of production, here, is cut off from the economy of consumption. The Woollett industry, aided by an advertising section, seems to generate money in a dematerialized mode, and to reinvest it in such indigestible products as the green glossy Woollett Review, whose covers form the 'specious shell' of purely conceptual work, 'a mere rich kernel of economics, politics, ethics' (116). The review contrasts not only with the ripe display of lemon-colored volumes at a Parisian bookstore, 'as fresh as fruit on the tree' (116), but also, still more poignantly, with the carnal, 'salmon-colored' Paris Revue (375). American plutocrats go hungry, in this sense, unless they turn to the European mode of appetitive consumption. In the novels that follow, such immaterial production emerges distinctly in relation to consumerist hunger, focused on the material, organic plenty of Europe. American magnates and heiresses are irresistibly drawn to the old world, where they allow their fabulous fortunes to be invested and consumed.

The individuating agency of writing, another form of immaterial industriousness, figures for Strether in terms of spatial and temporal separateness - concretely, in terms of his distance from his correspondent and employer. At Chester, charmed by the red velvet band around Maria Gostrey's neck, an emblem of *breathless* sensuality, he feels that 'a man conscious of a man's work in the world' can have nothing to do with such lures (90). Mrs Newsome's Elizabethan ruche, we gather, has never so troubled his professional conscience. His sense of identity requires breathing space - a space which writing, as a medium of spirit (the pneumatic tube comes to mind), is able to define and inhabit.

While Mrs Newsome's spirituality stands for the possibility of breathing, Mme de Vionnet's corporeality is umbilical - anaerobic, or aquatic, as well as alimentary. She is an organic reservoir of plenty, an inexhaustible fund, opposed to life 'by the sweat of one's brow' in the broad sense of psychological, moral and professional agency. A life of passion, in this configuration, leads to regressive states of merging and nonentity. Strether's psycho-cultural choice is, as it were, between starvation and suffocation - or between famine and hanging, to mix one's proverbs.

At the commencement of his Parisian experience, he has an anxious fantasy of being seen by Mrs Newsome in his state of breathless immersion: 'poor Lambert Strether washed up on the sunny strand by the waves of a single day, poor Lambert Strether thankful for breathing-time and stiffening himself while he gasped' (113). Respite from the Parisian overflow of sensation is afforded by the General Post Office, the 'sunny stand'

in whose direction he is headed, with a view of collecting his letters from Woollett. Imagery of water comes to figure for him an intimate bond with Mme de Vionnet - a sense of being launched with her in one boat, while the expectation at Woollett is that he should rather 'cling with intensity to the brink, not to dip so much as a toe into the flood' (338). The conceit finds a literal correlative in the image of the current that carries her, with Chad, on their boating excursion in the country; Strether's impression, just before they float into his ken, is that such a river 'set one afloat almost before one could take up the oars' (459).

The idea of Woollett comes, in turn, to embody a threat of dehydration, if also a welcome sufficiency of air. Strether's nascent interest in Mamie makes him suddenly,

> as under the breath of some vague western whiff, homesick and freshly restless; he could really for the time have fancied himself stranded with her on a far shore, during an ominous calm, in a quaint community of shipwreck. Their little interview was like a picnic on a coral strand; they passed each other, with melancholy smiles, and looks sufficiently allusive, such cupfuls of water as they had saved.
>
> (381)

In the midst of the aquatic life of Paris, Sarah Pocock, in 'splendid isolation' (399), struggles to preserve her own pneumatic mode of being. 'She can breathe,' Strether says of her at the party her brother gives in her honor. The din of festivity is drowned for him in the sound of her respiration. Her respiration is, as he puts it, literally all he can hear (400).

For all its psychological subtlety, the method of portraiture that emerges here hardly corresponds with our notions of realist representation. We experience Mrs Newsome's 'whole moral and intellectual being or block,' the congealed form of pressure she embodies, not strictly within the confines of character, but as the revelation of a mechanism of psychic coercion which inhibits desire. A dimension of psychic depth unfolds through the attenuation of representationalist strategies, as characters become informed by psycho-cultural presences and patterns.

## VI

The strain on the imagination of desire finds expression, for Strether, in the fiction of the 'virtuous attachment,' a theory whose cultivation reveals the deep strangeness of passionate intimacy in the imaginative



domain of the novel, and helps assert, with this, the presence and authority of individual consciousness against the de-individuating currents of passion. If passion is experienced as an assault on the discrete sphere of consciousness, the theory of the 'virtuous attachment/ with its subjective interpretive edge and its investment in the phenomenology of the singular, is a way for consciousness to defend itself.

The peculiar imagistic texture of *The Ambassadors* grows, in part, out of this focus on the interface of consciousness and craving. The late fiction is pervaded with figurative imagery of alimentary consumption, but there is no other work by James where this figurative vein has as its counterpart such intense preoccupation with the *physical,* gustatory acts of consuming and being consumed. It is as if the metabolism of the novel were burdened with an excessively rich diet, which made processes of imaginative conversion difficult and halting.

The sense, throughout, is of the difficulty of maintaining a live connectedness between the worlds of Woollett and Paris. The umbilical channel of Europe passes, through the reflective medium of consciousness, into the opposite element, immaterial cables and tubes. The vascular system of the body, as it were, is displaced into language and thought, and it is not clear how its organic life may survive the passage into conscious, communicable experience. The Preface figures the 'note absolute' of the novel in an image suggestive of an ordeal of this kind. Strether is pictured stand-* ing 'full in the tideway, driven in, with hard taps, like some strong stake for the noose of a cable, the swirl of the current roundabout it' (Preface, 34). A cable, or *tether,* seems to be *stretched* into transcendent space, from the projected figure of the body in passion. The image, as of an imaginative tightrope act, serves to link Strether, in name and experience, with an array of stunts and performances depicted in the late novels - figurative theatricals, circus-ring displays, water gymnastics and trapeze acts.

This paradoxically tensile experience, as of an outstretched cable fastened to an immaterial object, is imaginatively sustained against the vor-> tex of history itself. The experience of *The Ambassadors* is of 'writing against time' (301), a protracted anticipation of foredoomed collapse. This sense of urgency surfaces, at one point, in a beautiful, ambiguous metaphor: 'Strether hadn't had for years so rich a consciousness of time - a bag of gold into which he constantly dipped for a handful' (136). Harry Levin, in his Introduction, reads the image as an ironic rendition of Franklin's aphorism, 'time is money' (Introduction, 28). By extension, in terms of the *donees* of novel, Strether's subversive delay in Paris *deprives* him of a bag of gold. He is cheated from his leisure by the ubiquitous 'tick of the great Paris clock' (111), emblem of pervasive, continual forfeiture.

Virtually every new installment of the narrative picks up the thread with a reference to the temporal scheme, and the text bristles with carefully measured temporal pointers, marking the passage of time often to the last precision of minutes. Within this frame, the strained pleasures of divagation enacted in the movement of syntax and plot - pauses, anticipations, excursions and recursions - are always threatened by the sensuous experiences they filter. In a characteristic instance of syntactic involution, a sensuously charged experience can be precipitated and abridged; a remembered 'foretaste' becomes a 'climax,' and the 'presentiments' with which the moment is 'warm' are already, at the same time, 'collapses' (79).

Time as the ticking of the Paris clock is insistently objectified and externalized; it is experienced as a resource or provision outside the self, which, however, acquires a predatory internality, consuming the self even as it is being consumed. At one point, time as an object emerges fully as a threatening, invasive feminine presence: *'Omnes vulnerant, ultima necat* (121) - Strether remembers having read of the Latin motto, a description of the hours observed on a clock by a traveler in Spain. The reference, we know, is to Gautier's *Voyage en Espagne* (1843), and the phrase evokes for Strether the succession of women with whom Chad is rumored to have been intimate in foreign countries. This epigrammatic conflation, here, of Eros and Time brings out the embodied, incarnational imagination of temporality in the novel, but also the fatality associated with it. History is the element of predatory erotic embodiment, and the 'historic muse' (151) of the novel, the archetypal *femme du monde,* is a revelation of embodied Eros.

Initially, the narrative consciousness maintains an ironic distance from its muse. Strether's modest Parisian affair does not seem to belong among her meaningful 'outbreaks,' his 'ships' are likely to seem mere 'cockles' to her (151). At the theater box, where Chad is about to make his first appearance, Strether's nervous excitement suggests a consciously inflated analogy with the 'accidents of high civilization,' the life of high pressure led by 'kings, queens, comedians' (153). On his first *flanerie,* however, memories of his first visit, years before, yield a personal sense of history as an ongoing process of displacement and waste. Historical recognition of this kind involves, for him, an agonizing tactility: 'The palace was gone - Strether remembered the palace; and when he gazed into the irremediable void of its site the historic sense in him might have been freely at play - the play under which in Paris indeed it so often winces like a touched nerve' (111).

At Gloriani's party, he rubs shoulders with *gros bonnets,* ambassadors and duchesses. Above all, he meets the supreme type of the *femme du monde,* in whose archetypal personal history his own vision of history will crystallize. The early portrayal of Maria Gostrey as Mary Stuart, in a 'cut down' dress and a velvet band encircling her throat, prefigures the final portrayal of Mme de Vionnet as a historical incarnation of Passion. Approaching the house in the Rue de Bellechasse for the last time, Strether's susceptibility to the vibrations of 'the vague voice of Paris' subjects him to

> odd starts of the historic sense, suppositions and divinations with no warrant but their intensity. Thus and so, on the eve of the great recorded dates, the days and nights of revolution, the sounds had come in, the omens, the beginnings broken out. They were the smell of revolution, the smell of the public temper - or perhaps simply the smell of blood.
>
> (475)[14]

Mme de Vionnet is dressed 'in the simplest coolest white, of a character so old fashioned [...] that Madame Roland on the scaffold must have worn something like this.' The white robe serves as a kind of typologi* cal fulfillment of the motif of red in women's apparel: Maria's velvet band, the gleam of the color of wine on Marie's black robe at Notre Dame (275) and Sarah's crimson gown. Marie de Vionnet's passion is rendered as a convergence of antithetical images: the scriptural echo of the Apocalypse, 'the robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb' (Revelation 7:14), and the bloody image of the guillotine. A cleft sense of sanctity in sin reveals itself, here, as the core of a late moment in a fraught historical trajectory.

## VII

In the aftermath of his ordeal, Strether toys with the idea that 'he might for all the world have been going to die.' The prospect of returning to Woollett spells 'reckoning' and 'extinction.' He pictures himself floating toward it as on a bier, on Coleridge's underground river, 'through these caverns of Kublah Khan' (489).

The Coleridgean figure is an early instance of the seepage into James's late fiction of Romantic and Victorian visions of the east. In *The Wings of the Dove,* the colonialist 'heir of all the ages' of Tennyson's *Locksley Hall* is recast as the 'heiress of all the ages,' whose personal ordeal has powerful cultural or civilizational repercussions. The Jamesian east figures largely within the psycho-cultural frame of the declining west. Austin Warren, in

a footnote to his discussion of James's late metaphoric style, points to the characteristic opacity of the eastern imagery; the oriental figures, he writes, 'most habitually betoken the strangeness of that East which is East and hence incommunicable to the West' (RO, 151, n2). This strangeness, however, acquires resonance in relation to the familiar; it is, in this sense, imaginatively continuous with the strange and wayward cultural forms of Europe - French medievalism in *The Ambassadors,* or Venetian Rococo in *The Wings of the Dove.*

The sacrificial matrix of *The Ambassadors* seems to suggest that civilized life, projected here through elaborate patterns of French history and culture, is essentially moribund - like the fire in Shakespeare's sonnet, consumed with that which it was nourished by. The image of consciousness as a 'helpless jelly,' poured into multiform molds and baked by the Great Cook, seems to express the essence of the human lot, in a sense peculiarly resonant with the religious codices of ancient India. Charles Malamoud, in a study of Vedic ritual titled *Cuire le Monde,* gives the taxonomic definition of man in the sacred texts: *'Des tous les animaux aptes a* etre *victimes sacrificielles I'homme est le seul qui soit apte aussi a* faire *des sacrifices'* (CM, 8). Sacrifice is thus the definitive condition of existence and action. As 'burnt offering,' or cooking, it is performed on an object, but in Vedic India, as well as in the world of *The Ambassadors,* it is at a fundamental level a sacrifice of self.

Still, if the germinal conceit of *The Ambassadors* presents the condition of sacrifice as predetermined and universal, the Great Cook and his human molds could not have figured with equal force in a novel set in Venice or London. As Carlyle remarked, the definition of Man as the 'Cooking Animal' is highly acceptable to the French, but fails to account for the inhabitants of Tartary, Greenland or the Orinocco (SR, 41-2). James's metaphor of divine cookery is rooted in the world of French gastronomy, a world steeped in the historical imagination of Eucharistic sacrifice. It invokes, at a single stroke, the determinism of the Calvinist heritage and the Eucharistic tradition of the rival persuasion, set in the French milieu appropriate to them.

In *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924), Johan Huizinga examines chronicles of meals at the medieval court of Charles the Bold. Their tone strikes him as suitable to a portrayal of 'sacred mysteries.' The chronicler, he says,

> submits to his reader grave questions of precedence and of service, and answers them most knowingly - Why is the chief-cook present at the meals of his lord and not the 'ecuyer de la cuisine?' How does one proceed to nominate the chief-cook? To which he replies in his wisdom: When the office of chief-cook falls vacant at the court of the prince, the 'maitres d'hotel' call the 'ecuyers' and all the kitchen servants to them one by one. Each one solemnly gives his oath, and in this way the chief-cook is elected [....] Why do the 'panetiers' and cup-bearers form the first and second ranks, above the carvers and cooks? - Because they are in charge of bread and wine, to which the sanctity of the sacrament gives a holy character.
>
> (WMA, 41)



In *The Ambassadors,* the sense of cultural specificity that informs the vision of sacrifice, with the degree of circumscription and estrangement it entails, vies with the sense of universality, the ineluctable commonality, which the vision itself predicates. This divided attitude is expressed in the germinal conceit of the Cook and his molds as a split in the reflective mode; the reflective center is part of the 'helpless jelly' - the collective, sacrificial fluid of consciousness - but at the same time keeps aloof, and is able to regard it (itself) from a mysterious vantage point, transcending its determining laws. One 'takes' the form, reflexively, in the Great Cook's phrase, but may conceivably leave it at will, resisting its formative pressure.

The meeting with the lovers by the river, a scene of recognition whose model is vividly Greek, is projected through a bifocal lens of this kind. As in the earlier recognition scene in Notre Dame, the moment of insight is filtered through half-strange cultural screens, which the mind is able to animate without fully inhabiting. Strether's refusal to see himself as the hero of his situation creates a distancing perspective, which governs his excursion to the country from the start. He strikes out with the conscious design - 'artless enough,' as the narrative voice artfully puts it - of rediscovering in some pastoral spot a landscape by Lambinet he has once seen in a Boston gallery. French ruralism has been 'practically as distant as Greece' for him (452); but this is only as distant as the origin of his aesthetic filters - the pastoral, but also classical tragedy. The wish to see 'the remembered mixture resolved back into its elements' (453), to restore to nature his memory of the painting, harbors a twofold fantasy, of dismemberment and of kenotic evacuation. These psychic pulses suggest the complex charge of aesthetic experience at the cultural moment Strether inhabits; a charge that figures, again, as the price of the small Lambinet, which was 'beyond the dream of possibility' (452).

He alights at a randomly chosen rural destination, and easily steps into the picture-frame:

> The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and the river [...] 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 gray; it was all there in short - it was what he wanted: it was Tremont street, it was France, it was Lambinet.
>
> (453)

This constructed, factitious setting conceals under its placid surface the sharp, bitter edge of a tale by Maupassant (454). Strether anticipates the imminent coup de theatre, in an objectively unaccountable sense of being still, even with his mission thrown over, 'engaged with others and in the midstream of his drama,' with the 'catastrophe' still to come. (458) The 'scene' and 'stage' of his dramatic action (458), 'the picture and the play' (459), peopled with 'characters' (458) whom he himself has consciously projected, can end in nothing less surprising than the prodigious coincidence, 'the miracle of the encounter' (463) about to take place; this fateful accident conforms to the formal conventions of Greek drama, with its culminant 'catastrophe' - literally, a sudden turn of events. The novel engages here in an ironic play on the Aristotelian notion of *peripeteia,* surprise sanctioned by causality.

At the local inn, the Cheval Blanc, he arranges with the hostess a gastronomic 'climax' (458) for the day; she, for her part, serves him a 'bitter' before his repast. The consumption of the 'bitter' coincides with the arrival, which has its own pungency, of two other guests - by the river, as she has predicted, and in a boat of their own (459). The hostess, 'a stout white-capped deep-voiced woman,' is a female avatar of the Great Cook, a vision of 'nature as a white-capped master-chef.' Her means, Strether feels as he approaches the inn, are 'few and simple, scant and humble'; but they are *'the thing,* as he would have called it, even to a greater degree than Madame de Vionnet's old high salon where the ghost of the empire had walked.' All the while, however, the ghost of the Empire hovers backstage. The rustic air, at the Cheval Blanc, has a Parisian taste as of something mixed with art; it is pregnant with suggestion, every breath of the cooler evening is 'somehow a syllable of the text.' Just before the appearance of his friends, Strether's musings seem to conjure them up; or, rather, they seem to 'offer themselves, in the conditions so supplied, with a kind of inevitability'



(458). The runaway situation 'with the bit in its teeth,' has now, at the 'White Horse' (the recurrence of the name in English is telling), been led to water, and will be made to drink. ••

The play on the formal inevitability of the unexpected has the effect/ in part, of puncturing the notion of determination; it suggests a possibility of treating experience ironically, from without, and its cultural molds as mutable. Greek determinism itself may be regarded as a thing of the past. Miss Barrace, a Gallicized expatriate, is once compared to 'one of the famous augurs replying behind the oracle, to the wink of the other' (399); the figure points to the obsolescence of the great oracular tradition, whose debasement in the Roman period is associated here with latter-day decadence. At the same time, it is far from clear what pos^ sibility of life is held out in the negative vision of one who has moved into this outer darkness, beyond the purview of cultural embeddedness;

## VIII

In part, the novel itself seems to recognize an impediment to its imaginative unfolding, something that may be described as an impairment of its capacity for play. *The Ambassadors* is in an obvious sense the most playful of James's late fictions; the distancing of consciousness from what it recognizes, increasingly, as its formative patterns, liberates a critical, ironic sensibility. This very playfulness, however, curbs a fuller possibility for consciousness of playing itself out, through and beyond the limits of its imprints and grids. The novel seems to dream of, without allowing for/ the imaginative scope of tragic action.

Play, experienced above all as a form of dramatic action, emerges in the late novels as a highly expressive, generative mode of conscious being. It steers clear of the Scylla and Charybdis of *The Ambassadors,* living by the sweat of one's brow and the dream of aquatic, umbilical immersion. In dramatic terms, it opens into the space of classical tragedy, which holds together action and passion, the full force of agency and profound receptiveness. The trope of ambassadorship may be taken to represent the novel's aporetic response to the problem of agency; the ambassador, here, is committed to a slavish, mechanically representationalist form of service, or else rebels and forfeits all possibility of significant action. Actors, on the other hand, are agents as well as agonists; their performance has a simultaneously inward and outward orientation, an inseparably subjective and objective force.

James's late imagination is particularly attuned to the primary sources and matrices of ludic forms. Strether's European journey is, in this

sense, a quest for the kind of nurturance that might issue in richer, fuller modes of play. Maria Gostrey offers provision that is less than fulfilling; having 'held out his small thirsty cup to the spout of her pail,' he hopes to be able to 'toddle alone,' taking his nourishment, as he puts it, from other tributaries (296, 303-4). Still, his imaginative 'toddle' remains a strained, precarious activity. It crystallizes as an embattled response to reality, craving its nourishment and refusing it at the same time. It disguises a truth, 'the deep, deep truth' (468), as he puts it, of his friends' intimacy, with which he is all the while kept anxiously preoccupied. When it is out, he finds that it has not been far to seek, despite such 'quantity of make-believe' as has been practiced; and that the practice of make-believe has been in part his own. 'It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; he almost blushed, in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll.' His sense of betrayal mixes with a sudden perception of exclusion, which leaves him feeling bereft, 'lonely and cold' (468). He had tried to act a part in a human drama, but the drama now revealed its mainspring, a compelling source he cannot tap. This apprehension of curtailed participation, with the revelatory dimension of his own complicity, is the heart of his recognition. After the pattern of *Oedipus Rex,* he emerges as the object as well as the subject, the prey and the hound, in the occult hunt the novel stages. Unlike Oedipus, however, and much like his fictional avatar in *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903), he shies away from objectified action (an action whose misplaced center he nonetheless becomes), displacing it by a self-regarding theater of consciousness.

The third-person narrative mode alerts us to the ways in which the fine and supple texture of Strether's consciousness, the flickering *lambent* quality evoked by his name,[15] becomes its own absorbing drama, a 'relation,' as Adrian Poole speaks of it, between narrator and protagonist, which is 'James's most cunning blend of twoness and oneness' (HJ, 46). The narrative investment in reflexive ironies and ambiguities reads as an internalized, structured response to the presence of an object that frustrates and entices, baffles and lures. It is at once a defense against and a helpless enactment of the exclusionary spectacle whose emblem is Paris: 'some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next.' Consciousness, here, confronts an object it perceives as detached from itself, precariously suspended, highly unstable. We sense the alien nature of the object and its beguiling, .irbitrary metamorphic processes; unaccountable freezings and meltings, crystallizations and liquefactions.



The reflexive withdrawal of consciousness from its object has its coun--terpart in an imaginative avoidance, structured into the fabric of the novel. In *The Ambassadors,* the projection of maternal, feminine archetypes is marked by a split. Mrs Newsome and Mme de Vionnet, like Woollett and Paris, belong to a single psychic economy; they are polarized aspects of a single maternal, feminine entity, experienced as sublime and exclusory, but also tantalizingly alluring. As characters, however, these poles remain fixed in their separateness; they come to no significant reciprocal resonation. Mrs Newsome's daunting, impervious presence, her 'whole moral being or block,' is once figured as 'some particularly large iceberg in a cold blue northern sea' (448); Mme de Vionnet, at the other pole, is a creature of the same element, in a liquefied, overheated phase. The imaginative conduits leading from one to the other are, however, largely blocked, as if the novel shrank from expressing in full the conflicted longings by which it is gripped: the experience of desire as prohibitive and of prohibition as desirable.

It seems that without fully realized conflict, the full range of play remains unrealized as well. Maria Gostrey is thus 'the most unmitigated and abandoned of *ftcelles,'* and the Preface proposes frankly 'to tear off her mask' (Preface, 47). She is a piece of mechanical, instrumental stagecraft, artificially connective. In this sense, as her surname intimates, she embodies a form of the 'ghostly' - a device laid bare, like Miss Barrace's false augurs.

The reference to her as 'abandoned' *ficelle* is, of course, poignantly punning. Strether justifies his final rejection of her by a predetermined 'logic' of being right - of 'not, out of the whole affair, to have got any* thing for myself (512). Such logical stringencies are wrought into the very structure of perception and consciousness, as a defense against the woundable nature of experience. It is less a matter of 'being "right,"' Maria observes, than of one's 'horrible sharp eye' for what makes one so. Self-consciousness, which takes the form of moral stricture, is used here to circumvent the ambiguous investments, treacheries and failings of live contact.

## IX

In *The Ambassadors,* some of the constitutive, sustaining of structures of consciousness are laid bare, examined and destabilized. The final gesture of the novel, sighing itself 'all comically, all tragically' away, is

charged with a sense of indeterminacy: comedy and tragedy, aliveness and deadness, are bewilderingly entwined. The fullness of life realized through forms of empathic play is felt to be fatal to the armature of the self, its means and mechanisms of survival. In *The Wings of the Dove,* this paradox is entered and engaged with. Milly Theale, in the early phase of her European adventure, toys with unripe imaginings of romance, 'like the secrecies of a little girl playing with dolls when conventionally 'too big' (190). As the action unfolds, however, play is increasingly worked into the tragic, passional matrix of the novel, and becomes a vehicle for psychic reconfiguration. The striking figural textures of *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl,* which draw heavily on theatricality and spectacle, may be taken, in this respect, as a surface index for a performative deep structure.

In this light, the late prose emerges as a medium shaped by sensuous currents which, as they manifest themselves in language, are variously engaged with, resisted, deflected, filtered or transmuted; or, to put it the other way around, purposive, conceptualized and generalized expression can recoil from, collapse or mutate into sensuously charged forms.

The prose of *The Ambassadors* is, I have suggested, interspersed with unprocessed sensuous material. Dining with Waymarsh at their Parisian hotel, Strether experiences a guilty thrill, which mixes with an urge to make a 'confession' to his friend, 'in the very taste of the soup, in the goodness, as he was innocently pleased to think of, of the wine, in the pleasant coarse texture of the napkin and the crunch of the thick-crusted bread' (130). At the Cheval Blanc, he can anticipate 'partaking, at the close of day, with the enhancements of a coarse white cloth and a sanded floor, of something fried and felicitous, washed down with authentic wine' (454). This anticipated repast turns into a convivial meal with his friends, 'a marked drop into innocent friendly Bohemia,' in the course of which, however, his consciousness, though 'muffled,' is said to have had 'its sharpest moments' (465), impressions stored for future assessment. These moments reveal to him later the amount of fiction and fable, the quantity of make-believe he has been forced to 'swallow,' and which so disagrees with his 'spiritual stomach' (468). It seems, beyond the particulars of the episode, that the narrative itself balks here at the sensuous cravings it expresses, which are imperfectly adjusted to the conscious and aesthetic apparatus at its disposal. In the later novels, sensuous, especially alimentary imagery is largely absorbed into elaborate metaphoric tissues, as if to dramatize its enhanced imaginative digestibility, as well as the highly complex nature of these digestive, transformative processes.

1. Biographical background on this germinal scene is supplied in Edel's *Life* (HJL, 447), among other sources.
2. For details, see n18 of the Introduction.
3. The passage echoes Hawthorne's own sense, given voice in the Preface to *The Marble Faun* (1860), 'of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country

where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong [...]. Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wallflowers need ruin to make them grow' (MF, vi).

4. Richard Salmon, following Michael Anesko's argument in *Friction with the Market,* discerns in *The Ambassadors* a growing awareness on James's part of a forced complicity with the marketeering strategies of the publishing industry. The conflicts with which materialist criticism is concerned here are, however, intimately tied up with other, psychic and cultural domains of friction.
5. The three Marys of the novel, Maria, Marie and Mamie, have an archetypal kinship with the Marys of Scripture, as well as with a number of royal Marys - Mary Stuart, Bloody Mary, Marie Antoinette. Other late heroines, too, have Marian names: May in *The Sacred Fount* and in *The Beast in the Jungle,* Milly and Maud in *The Wings of the Dove* and Maggie in *The Golden Bowl.* These characters seem to link up biographically, in different ways, not only with James's cousin, Mary (Minny) Temple, but also with his mother, Mary Walsh James, and with his favorite niece, Mary Margaret (Peggy) James.
6. Julie Rivkin notes that Maria's 'act of mediation opens up a way for Strether that is far from the course he had intended to travel'; hence her surname, which 'falls one consonant short of 'go straight' and leaves us with the open-ended sound and open path of "go stray"' (FP, 69).
7. On the *ficelle,* see the Prefaces to *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors* (LC II, 1082, 1317), and the letter to Violet Hunt from 16 January 1902 (L, IV, 221).
8. The farcical European conversion in store for Waymarsh is signaled by his name. Displacing 'Waymark' in the Notebooks, the version we have suggests 'the transformation of severity into uncertainty and the breakdown of proper boundaries that is the fate of New England in the novel' (FP, 69).
9. In Shakespeare's play, Enobarbus says of Cleopatra: 'Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety. Other women cloy / The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies' (II.ii.244—7). The alimentary figure clearly runs with the grain of James's vision of his heroine; but the phrase 'various and multiform' points more directly to Virgil's *'varium et mutabile semper femina'* than it does to the Shakeperean verses. With the presence of Dido it invokes, the allusion to the *Aeneid* (IV.569) is inflected with a predication of abandonment - a vein fulfilled later, in the recasting of Mme de Vionnet as a forsaken Cleopatra (see p. 18). Above all, however, the Virgilian echo serves to deepen the mythic and historical resonances which conjure the novel's muse into being. The double prism of *Antony and Cleopatra* and the *Aeneid* bring into sharp focus an imaginative field polarized between Occident and orient, a central dimension of James's international theme.
10. On the multilingual confessionals at St Peter's, see *The Marble Faun,* 'Altars and Incense' (XXXVIII), pp. 256-7.
11. Chad is associated with Titian's 'overwhelming portrait of the young man with the strangely-shaped glove' in the Louvre (145). In the portrait, the young man's hands are a locus of special interest; the naked hand is tensed and seems misshapen, with only the thumb and the ringed index finger fully visible. The strangely shaped glove, held in the other hand, is vaguely suggestive of flayed skin.



12. St Lambert was a seventh-century martyr, who died a violent death, perhaps as a result of an outspoken denunciation of the adultery of a dignitary.
13. The Puritan men of the novel are pagans of a different race; Jim Pocock is once imaged as a tent-dweller (373), and Waymarsh as Chief Sitting Bull (253). The sense in which extreme westernness, embodied in the American Indian, may be 'predestined' for a transformative encounter with the east emerges more distinctly in *The Golden Bowl,* through the figures of Pocahontas and the Indian squaw (GB, 65, 548).
14. An early version of this image appears in a letter sent to William James from Paris in the fall of 1872. The traveler laments the general 'want of comprehension of the real moral situation of France [•••]• Beneath all this neatness and coquetry, you seem to smell the Commune suppressed, but seething' (L, I, 300).
15. My thanks to Eph Gerber for suggesting the link with the flame-like.

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