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THE MODERNIST DIMENSIONS OF HENRY JAMES' TWO MASTERWORKS: *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY* (1881) AND *THE AMBASSADORS* (1903)

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Abstract

The early twentieth century is usually dubbed the starting-point of modern literature, but prior to the 1900s a string of novels was written by Henry James in which a slight break with the previous narrative tradition can be starkly observed. The most significant elements which separate modern tradition from the conventional one include: "point of view, interior monologue, stream-of-consciousness, fragmented narratives, extreme subjectivity and broken chronology" (Professor Grant Voth). In this study, I want to deal with these elements as developed by Henry James in the late 1880s to the last stages of his career.

The first part of this essay will take into account why Henry James is usually seen as the major discoverer of modern novel (or at least the one whose roots can be traced back to him) and his main contribution to the genre and the second part would survey the characteristics described above at play within the two eponymous novels of this essay. At the end I would sum up the framework of my essay in a unified conspectus.

Keywords: Modernist Aspect, Novel, Narration, Language.

I. Introduction

Henry James (1843-1916), probably the most ambiguous author in the western canon with respect to his identity is an original writer and by original I mean 'someone who has introduced a new genre in literature.' He, along with his friend Joseph Conrad, is the one who helped initiate the 'psychological-realist novel' in the early twentieth century with his gargantuan trilogy (*The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*) and Conrad's late novels such as *Nostromo* or *Under Western Eyes*. In this novels action is not as important as had been in the previous ages of novel writing, rather extreme caution is taken to deal with the mental acuity of the characters.

According to most scholars (including Harold Bloom in *Novels and Novelists* and James himself who later added the *Prefaces* in 1909), *The Portrait* which was written a good two decades before the late novels I have illustrated above contains modern elements as well as techniques. Bloom considered it James' best work and he has pointed out that "if we might call this novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is quite plausible to dub *The Ambassadors*, *The Portrait of a Gentlemen*" (Bloom, 2005, 198).

F. R. Leavis also set high accolades for this novel and says that "James' genius is represented by this book" (Leavis, 1948, 127). Despite all these James dug in his heels and stayed determined that the latter novel "has no doubt more superior roundness" (Preface to the *Portrait*, 1909). These aspects of the novel have caused it to gain in stature in the twentieth century so that by now James' name is often synonymous with his 1881 masterpiece rather than *The Ambassadors* among literature students.

Let me illustrate all I have said in greater detail by expatiating more on the points I have referred to above with regard to the modernist elements found in the two novels. The essay tries to deal with each novel separately – a strategy that was set forward in the thesis.

II. The Portrait of a Lady (1881) and The Ambassadors (1903) Introduced as Avant Garde Works of Modern Literature

1. Henry James's Own Identity

The genius of Henry James lies in the fact that he keeps double identities at the same time. That of being an American writer living in Europe writing about his fellow countrymen sacrificed at the hands of Europeans and that of a linguistic practitioner who plays with British English diction as opposed to American diction. There are lots of exempla in the "Portrait" such as "playing patience" instead of "playing solitaire" or "autumn" rather than "fall". He also uses British spellings such as "colour, splendour, armour" to convey one of his identities. The question of "double identity" was instigated by his life in Europe where as an adult man in the 1880s he got a "*double vision*" of himself living in the U.S as a teenager. This is a very amazing process which he later turned into one of his often-used techniques of novel writing. What he leaves behind is inherited by an all-star cast of writers of the twentieth century American literature all the

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way up to the contemporary writer Alice Munro (1932-) who uses this astonishing technique especially in her 1968 collection of stories "Dance of the Happy Shades" which includes fifteen stories, some of which are classics of the genre – "*Walker Brother's Cowboy*" and "*The Peace of Utrecht*".

2. Linguistic Modernity in "Portrait"

Not only does James look towards the future in his personality, he also does this through an astounding skill at writing. His novel "The Portrait of a Lady" comes to mind at this juncture. The character of Isabel Archer is quite revealing in *The Portrait* in terms of her unusual social and inner life. An earlier prototype of this psychological character study can be found, in agreement with Eric Auerbach in his really masterful book, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), in Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) whose heroine is always in abeyance in regard to her fate. Like Isabell, Emma Bovary is conscience-driven and bored with her life. It is in her social life that Emma consciously finds out that she is tired of living with her husband. Auerbach analyzes one brilliant passage which comes in the last chapter (9) of part 1 of *Madame Bovary* in his essay entitled 'Realism in *Madame Bovary*' which is contained in *Mimesis*:

> But it was above all the meal-times that were unbearable to her, in this small room on the ground floor, with its smoking stove, its creaking door, the walls that sweated, the damp flags; all the bitterness in life seemed served up on her plate, and with smoke of the boiled beef there rose from her secret soul whiffs of sickliness. Charles was a slow eater; she played with a few nuts, or, leaning on her elbow, amused herself with drawing lines along the oilcloth table cover with the point of her knife (Auerbach, 1946, 412).

For Auerbach everything in this passage comes together and aside from talking about the realistic aspects of this passage, he elongates on the inner life of the heroine for 11 pages. I do not want to digress from *The Portrait*, but the point that I am going to explicate is that Isabel is James' late version of Emma and it is interesting to note that there are a lot of parallels between the two heroines. Isabel's most seminal soul-searching comes in chapter 42 when she sits through the night and cogitates on the labyrinth she has to deal with – the extrication from which seems to be impossible. This chapter is a very modest form of stream-of-consciousness and was later taken a step or two further by James himself in *The Ambassadors*, still to be ameliorated by Joyce in the last paragraph of *The Dead* (Professor Voth, 2007) – the last story in *Dubliners* (1904) and finally to be taken to its acme in *Ulysses* in 1922 – the "annus mirabilis of modern fiction" (Jeffrey Perl, 1995, lecture 5).

One of the innovations James has put forward in this novel is the careful use of language which he learnt from Flaubert – his senior friend. In fact, in one of the essays he has written on Flaubert he says "he is so careful with language that every word has been chosen like poetry and the substitution of the words would destroy the beauty of the text" (*Gustav Flaubert*, 385). I think the same story could be true of the diction of this novel and as I have pointed out in my thesis there are so many beautiful allusions and colorful passages that one might wonder why his pen does not dry up! He starts long sentences with the pulchritude and freshness of the rhythm of poetry. Lionel Kelly in his 'Introduction' introduces several brilliant passages to substantiate his claims of calling the novel a poetic one. The passage is from chapter six of the novel:

> She was always planning her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress. Her nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one's spirit was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses.

But she was often reminded that there were other gardens in the world than those of her remarkable soul, and that there were moreover a great many places which were not gardens at all, only dusky pestiferous tracts planted thick with ugliness and misery. (*The Portrait*, 57) James has availed himself of 'nature' lexicon and related it to the 'human nature' of the protagonist so stunningly that one wonders he might be a Romantic poet – James invokes some of the Romantic poets such as Byron (131). The language is not only poetic, but it complicates the ease with which one might read, for example, a facile Hemingway novel. As Jakobson has said any writer has his own special '*dominant*' and early in my thesis I referred to some major writers' '*dominant*.' This particular device with respect to James is certainly '*the poetic language*' he has used in this novel. Every word is so carefully chosen that makes the diction seem as if one reads poetry – a claim that James himself made of Gustav Flaubert's style. This may not be universally true of all James' novels and some that I have studied such as *Daisy Miller*, *The Europeans* or even *Washington Square* cannot be pigeon-holed into this category. James' serious writing started from this novel and he himself praises his achievement to the point the he dubs it his 'second best novel.'

The novel is absolutely beautiful – idyllic in scene and setting, marbled and chiseled in its sentence structure, careful in tone and plot. With respect to this point one can merely flick through the book and read the first paragraph in which James' idyllic evocation of the countryside appeals to any careful reader:

> Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not – some people of course never do – the ceremony is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime (*The Portrait*, 17).

And this does not stop here. The first paragraph of the book takes up a space of precisely one page and James never loses the thread of his narrative. The pulchritude of this language (in most of his middle period novels) rains on everyone who wracks his brains to get pleasure from reading a Henry James novel. The denotation in the words 'afternoon tea' strikes the attention of the reader, as do the two personifying adjectives 'admirable and innocent' which are used metaphorically.

A question that crops up concerns the character of the protagonist. I would like to add that the name 'Isabel Archer' has been later the imitated by James' junior female friend Edith Wharton, who used the name for the protagonist (Newland Archer) of her most famous and Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Almost from the beginning she is anticipated to have the fate which later ruins her. The fortune, the wealth and the money that she comes into, affect all the characters – the whole shebang. Even in choosing her name James is careful. Words are important for James to impart what they imply. Lionel Kelly in his amazing introduction to the novel says: ironically Archer *implies* the arc of the flight of her arrow of desire brings her precisely where she and the Touchetts, least want her to be in the toils of a loveless marriage to a man who married her for money. There is more to it than this, but this is Isabel's fate (Kelly's Introduction, 1999, vi).

The novel is starkly different from *The Ambassadors* since the latter book was published two decades after *The Portrait*. More or less, Henry James in *The Portrait* is a late Victorian novelist writing about the fate of a woman while *The Ambassadors* illustrates a modern novelist. These Victorian elements can possibly be inferred partly from watching Jane Campion's amazing 1996 cinematic version of the novel which stars Nicole Kidman in the role of Isabel Archer. "It fantastically captures the 19th century woman's experience of alienation and fragmentation in the pieced fragments, giant hands, ancient heads, broken trunks of the human body" (Thompson, 2005, 526).

Moreover, James uses literary and figurative language to reveal and amplify the indications of scene, character, conversation, motive and event. He uses images of, fruit, flowers, birds, landscapes and the picturesque lexes propitious to the novel's title; I might mention some examples as italicized by Kelly in the Introduction: "Mrs. Touchett's thinking of a gentlewoman without relation as a *flower without foliage* (*The Portrait*, 195), Ralph's urging of Isabel not to try to form her character so much because it is like pulling a young *rose* and instead advising her: *spread your wings* (196), Isabel's visualization like a *winged creature*" (329). This language conditions the tone of what we read, and bears upon the difficulty of how we read the novel as a whole, given its mixture of comedic and tragic elements. The question that I want to raise here is: are we reading a comedy or a dark tale of perception? The answer to my question is twofold, viz. we read both. I may not be quite correct, nonetheless after my second reading of the Preface I paused over this statement, "the treatment of the subject which involved never forgetting, by any lapse, that the thing was under a special obligation to be amusing" (*The Portrait*, 15), which maybe is fairly fit to support my claim of calling it a comedy. The whole point of this novel might be neatly summarized in one sentence: that its *language* speaks for itself independently. Language is the macabre note by which I want to turn to the analysis of the "*Ambassadors*".

3. Linguistic Modernity in the "Ambassadors"

Some of the amazing qualities characteristic to this novel of which *The Portrait* is nude and have already been expatiated upon by various scholars include the use of various rhetorical figures, introducing Ficelles to literature, limiting the point of view to a single character, and contributing to later stream-of-consciousness novel of Joyce and Woolf (Forster's Note to *The Ambassadors*, ix). Examples of the use of the rhetorical figure of *anaphora* can be seen luxuriantly throughout this book. Towards the middle of the novel James starts nearly every paragraph with "*our friend*" to refer to Strether and linguistically, this is one of the usages of anaphora to which *The Portrait* is somehow a stranger. This may have been deliberate on the part of James, because this novel has (as he said) 'a more superior roundness than all my works' therefore, he tried his hand at any innovative rhetoric that came handy to make it worthy of the praise he has left the book with. James's opening and ending of the novel is another original innovative dimension which I have noticed of late. They are, at the same time diametrically opposed and closely related!

Let me elongate this point by saying that their exact similarity is the first and last words, both of which are *Strether* and by the same token, their opposing sides can be seen in the fact that it opens with *Strether's question* and end's *with Strether's own answer*! I may well be allowed to postulate (though I will not firmly state it, for I have not read this anywhere, it is just a guess) that this technique of beginning and ending a novel by the same words has been profited by two important modern novelists – Marcel Proust in '*In Search of Lost Time*' (1927) and James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), both of which begin and end with the word '*Time*.' Maybe this is another reason why James can be included within the group of 'early modern' novelists and it is frequently said of him that 'much of the modern fiction flows directly from Henry James'.

The next vital contribution that this book has bequeathed to subsequent literature is the use of 'third-person limited point of view' from which a generation of later novelists benefitted. Most 19th century writers used either first person narrator or an all-knowing narrator called omniscient that was outside the story and to describe the events like – based on Stendhal – "a mirror held up against nature" (Arnold Weinstein, 2007, lecture 6). Ian Watt's essay (The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*) reprinted in David Lodge's 1972 book, *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, explicates neatly on the overall state of this aspect of the novel. In this book though the narrative view is presented through an absent voice, James lets us know the situation of the characters and events only as far as the major protagonist, Strether, sees them, that is to say we are not allowed to transgress anywhere unless Strehther permits us – therefore a third person limited point of view is predominant.

James' Preface to this novel which is a fine analysis of the book as well (few 19th century writers have provided later generations with an analysis of their own novels) has launched the concept of Ficelle. M. H. Abrahms in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines it as "French for the string by which the puppeteer manages his puppets" (Abrams, 2011, 66). It is interesting to notice that most of the Ficelles found in James' novels are female figures (Mrs. Walker in *Daisy Miller*, Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait* and Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors*) who guide the troubled protagonists as their protégées. This, along with the diverse traits I have enumerated above, can be seen as quantum leaps to literature on the part of James.

One good example of Jamesian style in this novel that constantly teases the reader as to the way of puzzling out the drift of the situation is the last scene of the novel in which a confab occurs between Maria and Strether. In that particular scene the normal pattern of linear plotting (in comparison with the previous 19th century novelists) has been disintegrated and the conversation stops the reader from moving ahead without a careful focus on the book. This is one modest form of stream-of-consciousness (Arnold Weinstein, 1997, lecture 42).

The final point, in regard to this book, that I have prolonged in my thesis under the heading '*the quiddity of The Ambassadors*' is the influential 'life speech' which is given in Books 5 and 7 by Strether to 'Little Bilhum.' The space of an essay is too limited to give the whole passages nevertheless here is what resides in the core of the novel:

> Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so much as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had?
>
> What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. The affair – I mean the affair of life – couldn't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at the best a tin mould, either fluted 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; one lives in fine as one can (*The Ambassadors*, 114).

And in the seventh Book the novel offers:

> Of course I'm youth – youth for this trip to Europe. I began to be young, or at least to get the benefit of it, the moment I met you at Chester and that's what has been taking place ever since. I never had the benefit at the proper time – which comes to saying that I never had the thing itself. I'm having the benefit at this moment; I had it the other day when I said to Chad 'Wait'; I shall have it still when Sarah Pocock arrives. It's a benefit that a poor show for many people; and I don't know who else but you and I, frankly, could begin to see in it what I feel. I don't get drunk; I don't pursue the ladies; I don't spend money; I don't even write sonnets. But nevertheless I'm making up late for what I didn't have early. I cultivate my little benefit in my own little way. It amuses me more than anything that has happened to me in all my life. They may say what they like – it's surrender, it's my tribute, to youth (*The Ambassadors*, 179-180).

What drives me to include these passages is the influence it has had on a later generation of 20th century writer such as Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Vladimir Nabokov in *Laughter in the Dark* (1932), Somerset Maugham in *Up at the Villa* (1940) and a string of other authors which I have neatly included and quoted in my thesis. Some of the passages set down by those writers all smack of these 'life speeches' which were originally "recorded on October 31st , 1895. It was given by William Dean Howells,

standing in the garden of James McNeill Whistler's Parisian home, sermonized to young Jonathan Sturges that he must live while he was young" (Thompson, 2001, 1).

III. Conclusion

The discussion of Henry James cannot be wrapped up in an essay of this brief length. As John Carlos Rowe in an essay included in *A Companion to American Fiction* says James is "one of the finest nineteenth century novelists" (Thompson, 2005, 519). He has written extremely elephantine, yet beautiful, novels in such a language whose beauty dazzles the eye. I have often emphasized these two novels from among his oeuvre because (according to most critics) they illustrate James at the height of his two 'separate careers' as a novelist. In reading James one always needs to remember that he experienced a 'renewed youth' in his later period with his 1900s trilogy as does his hero in *The Ambassadors* – Strether. Reading James' novels should be done almost at a snail's pace so that no word may be lost or the beauty of the whole sentence will fade away. Such a reading is worth the effort one puts to it.

It is also true to say that because James wrote with scrupulous dexterity and extreme caution so that the reader has no choice but to come to terms with the pulchritude of that language. Linguistic complexity is what gives James an after-life.

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