The Vision of Excess: Specula(riza)tion in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of the performativity and metaphoricity of desire and its corollary—anxiety--in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. It examines the passage of Lambert Strether, the protagonist of the novel, to Europe as predominantly an exploration of the erotic, a conscious effort to delimit and to cross the boundary between self and other, with his eroticized and eroticizing speculation/specularization serving as the point of departure and penetration. However, encoded in the socio-political field of exchange, desire is also subject to the chain of displacements and deferments and, hence, only to partial fulfillment. Thus, rather than pursuing the thematic of the triumph of desiring imagination over reality in *The Ambassadors* as many Jamesian critics have done, this article examines the endless negotiation between the individual's desires and the dominant sexual ideology, focusing discussion on expenditure (restrictive or otherwise), sacrifice, and the theatricality of desire in the novel. The incessant dialectic between interdiction (in the form of the New England conscience) and its transgression both structures the novel's progress and maps out the itinerary of Strether's nomadic desire. This article concludes that Strether's specular/speculative economy denotes both the triumph and the defeat of his erotic imagination.

Key words: speculative economy, erotic imagination, *The Ambassadors*, expenditure, transgression, exchange.

"Supposing truth is a woman—what then?"
(Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 2)

"Striptease—at least Parisian striptease—is based on a contradiction: woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked."
(Roland Barthes, "Striptease" 85)

1. INTRODUCTION

Henry James writes in his preface to *The Ambassadors* that the most notable thing about Lambert Strether is his nationality: "Possessed of our friend's nationality ... there was a general possibility in his narrower localism" (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1310). Strether's nature and his localism show the New England denial of sensual pleasures. In the opening chapter when Maria Gostrey senses that in his walk with her Strether is indulging in something he does not think right, she describes this reluctance to enjoy himself as his failure. He then attributes it to the "failure of Woollett,"[1] saying that "I'm always considering something else ... than

[1] 1: 16. Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 2 vols. Subsequent references to this text will appear in parentheses.

the thing of the moment. The obsession of the other thing is the terror" (1: 19). This statement does not merely present one of Strether's most dominant personality traits: it synopsizes the nature of his erotic desire. As shall be argued later, given the special mission of Strether as an ambassador, his passage to Paris, the Babylon of the modern world, is predominantly an exploration of the erotic, a conscious effort to delimit and to cross the boundary between self and other, with his eroticizing speculation/specularization providing the point of departure and penetration. However, his exploration of the erotic is always resisted and simultaneously given momentum by his obsession with the interdiction of Woollett, which he calls "the terror." As he tells Maria, he "unspeakably" wants to give himself up to the pleasure of the moment, but he can't. This double movement of "if I only could" and "No—I can't" (1: 20)—that is, the incessant dialectic between the Woollett interdiction and its transgression—both structures the novel's progress and maps out the itinerary of Strether's nomadic desire.

In the opening pages of the novel, this dialectic of transgression and interdiction is translated into an operation of expenditure and saving. Arriving at Chester, Strether seems glad at the prospect of some free time for "the immediate and the sensible" (1: 4) in England before meeting Mr. Waymarsh, the lawyer from Milrose, Connecticut: "he was like a man who, belatedly finding in his pocket more money than usual, handles it a while and idly and pleasantly chinks it before addressing himself to the business of spending." The narrator then proceeds to describe what he calls the "oddity" of Strether's "double consciousness": "There was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference" (1: 5). Delay in gratifying his desire, erotic or otherwise, opens another space and time in which his double consciousness operates, simultaneously asserting and negating its sovereignty and lucidity by perpetuating his vacillating desire. Moreover, insofar as Strether's ambassadorial mission of rescuing Chadwick Newsome from the influence of the "bad" woman is concerned, delay will turn his transatlantic crossing into a double-crossing[2], while making it possible for him to snatch a "little super-sensual hour" (*Notebooks* 558).

2. "I SEND YOU BACK SPENT."

Strether's desire for and fear of "spending"—the common Victorian term for the climax of sexual pleasure, the equivalent of today's "coming"—reveals itself in his first encounters with Maria. At the beginning, Maria is warm, compassionate, and sensitive to his subtlest whims, but he trembles in her presence. He is not afraid of Maria: he is afraid of female sexuality and the painful perception it provokes. There is an indirect reference to Strether's castration anxiety in his declining Maria's offer to guide him through Europe and repatriate him back to America "spent": "I don't want your formula.... I feel quite enough ... your abysses. Spent!" (1: 37). "Spent" does not merely pick up the allusion to Maria's earlier promise to send him back spent: it also coveys a warning against the danger of what may await

[2] For a Derridean reading of the logic of Strether's delegation, see Julie Rivkin.

him at the end of her "abysses." With Maria, Strether anticipates a "peril of wantonness" and comments ruefully that "You've cost me already ... my past—in one great lump. But ... I'll pay with my last penny" (1: 45).

The dual movement of Strether's desire between transgression and interdiction[3] is more accurately presented in the scene in which he strolls, accompanied by Maria and Waymarsh, in the Rows of Chester. Walking on the street, Strether feels that his "previous virtue" seems to stare at him out of the shopping windows, which have made him "want more wants" (1: 40).[4] Crossing the boundary between transgression and interdiction reaffirms the existence of that boundary and therefore, for Strether, this crossing-over means both a negation of Woollett's interdiction and a synchronous return to or rebound upon it. On the other hand, this return also intensifies his desire to break its domination. A symbol of conspicuous consumption of the time, the shopping window in the Rows mirrors the nature of his desire. Beyond its pursuit of any definite individual object, desire is implicitly defined here as lack which creates more wants, or more precisely, a chain of wants. As such, desire seeks pleasure, but pleasure continuously eludes it by creating more possible future pleasures; therefore, desire is always subjected to a series of deferrals and displacements, and, except for the dubious pleasure of anticipation, gratification is always elsewhere. This is the nature of Strether's desire and, as shall be discussed later, it is displaced onto the "performance of 'Europe' " (2: 105).

At this stage of his journey, however, Strether is not unwittingly "float[ed]" into the "current" of the fashionable society (1: 41), and gives way to an easy initiation into the perplexing manners of Europe. Significantly, it is he, rather than Maria— "the mistress of a hundred cases of categories" of the American tourists (1: 11) — who identifies and appreciates the logic of Waymarsh's "sacred rage" (1: 45-46), i.e., his shopping sprees. The contingency of Strether's image shows that he can clearly see himself in relation to both his friend and the European environment, for he sharply assesses this sacred rage as Waymarsh's means of defending his American identity against the encroaching European culture and thereby proving himself master of the situation. Here, what Strether perceives of Waymarsh's shopping sprees is what Tony Tanner writes of *arriviste* Americans in the novel: "They are enthusiastic purchasers (to buy something is show your power over the seller; thus to reduce Europe to a shop is to treat it like a contemptuous patron)" ("The Watcher from the Balcony" 45). While Strether may sense the futility and absurdity of Waymarsh's act, he also half-reluctantly admires both his rigid loyalty to his cherished moral standards and his flair for self-dramatizing action. This admiration also betrays his own devaluation of his susceptibility to the trivial sensuous pleasures of Europe and of his deviations from the moral norms of New England.

On the other hand, Waymarsh's sacred rage can also be understood in terms of sexual desire. Civilization develops a variety of behaviors that delay and

[3] I am indebted to Georges Bataille for a dialectic between interdiction and transgression, self and other, restricted economy and general economy. For a discussion of this dialectic in relation to eroticism, see Bataille, esp. 29-39, 129-146; for a critique of Bataille's concept of economy, see Derrida.

[4] For a discussion on "proliferation of wants" in the context of the theory and practice of advertising in the nineteenth-century, see Bill Brown, esp. 16-18.

sometimes distract the basic sexual act, transforming it into art or the practice of perversions. Fetishism is one of the commonest practices that displace sexual desire; private pleasure can be found in unexpected objects of desire, such as music, food, nature, and religion (Freud 21: 82-85). According to one historian, the Victorians eroticized the very symbols of their age: the pleasure of iron locomotives or a day of conspicuous consumption in a gigantic department store (Gay 2: 312-318). Repression encourages deviation, that is, the channeling of energy into avenues not readily censored. The fact that Waymarsh has been separated from his wife for fifteen yeas further suggests that his sacred rage, which is one of his "periodical necessities" (1: 46), helps him release his over-charged sexual drive, which is significantly correspondent to his large income. Moreover, his spendthrift purchases also, as Holland puts it, "establish the act of spending and monetary vocabulary as the measure for Strether's own experience and obligations" (256). And, since Strether lacks the large income he envies in Waymarsh, he can only create, as the novel moves forwards, his own version of the "sacred rage" in the process of his transatlantic mission, especially in his involvement in the affair of Chad and Marie de Vionnet.

3. THE VISION OF EXCESS

In his preface to *The Ambassadors*, James writes, "the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision" (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1308). In the novel, vision and seeing are closely related to the theater and to imagery pertaining to the theater. Strether's adventure throughout the novel takes place under the aegis of drama and illusion in general. The theater and its metaphors offer a complete imaginative analogy for Strether's experience. Paris is a place where one loses his or her ability to discriminate between surface and depth, the real and the fictive. As Strether's consciousness registers it, Paris is "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" (1: 89). The streets of Paris (2: 24) constitute a theater of desire as much for Strether as for the less sensitive Pococks, who come over later as a second phalanx of ambassadors and await "the performance of 'Europe' " (2: 105). The Paris of the novel, as Strether asserts, is a world where the "visual sense" threatens to stifle any moral sense or seems to have obliterated it already and where, as Miss Barrace concedes, "we all do ... run too much to mere eye" (1: 206-207).

Theater becomes the appropriate and inevitable source of imagery, not only because it suits the estheticism and obsession with the surface appearances[5] that characterize Paris in the novel, but also because it provides the terms in which

[5] As Pana-Oltean writes, "Strether is in a permanent 'museum mood', engaged in the perception of a series of surface appearances. It is not so much that Strether perceives reality with an Impressionist's eye, but that he perceives what is already an Impressionist canvas" (189).

Strether's desiring imagination tends to work. By unsettling the boundary between the real and the imaginary, self and other, theater and its imagery reflect and give form to his unconscious desire and fear. For example, still in London, he is taken to the theater for the first time by Marie and, awash in his new impressions, he reacts to the play in a curious manner: "It was an evening, it was a world of types, and this was a connection above all in which the figures and faces in the stalls were interchangeable with those on the stage. He felt as if the play itself penetrated him with the naked elbow of his neighbor" (1: 53). The play, which seems to foretell the action of the novel, points directly to the melodrama that grips Chad and, by extension, Strether himself, for it stages the story of a "bad" woman who makes "a pleasant weak good-looking young man in perpetual evening dress do the most dreadful things" (1: 53). Seeing can spell catastrophe for Strether, but it also satisfies his sometimes cruel curiosity. As Leo Bersani writes of the act of seeing in James's characters, "the intensity of suffering and the intensity of pleasure in the single act of seeing suggests a dialectical unity in the act" (134). From this interpretive point of view, we can see clearly why Strether tells Maria, after the play, that Chad is a "wretched boy" and the woman in his life is "base, venal—out of the streets" (1: 55). Actually, Strether himself is the "wretched boy," compromised by his voyeuristic pleasure in the masochistic exploitation of the weak man in the play. This scopophilic impulse is a substitute for his thwarted phallic drives and reflects, in his primal fantasy, a need to be punished for the dangerous incest wish, which, as shall be discussed later, is to assume a more complicated and subtle form in the triangular relationship among Strether, Chad and Marie.

The easy exchange between stage and house, actors and audience which Strether perceives in his first theater visit cogently reflects his own shifting relation to other characters, especially to Chad and Marie. And his initiation through the theater is repeated in the Comédie Française, where he first meets Chad in Paris. In the scene, Chad upsets the boundary between stage and audience by his theatrical entry, in the moment "[t]he curtain had just again arisen, and, in the hush of the general attention," into the box where Maria, Waymarsh, and Strether sit (1: 135). It is partly due to his increasing confusion between the real and the fictive and partly due to Chad's expert performance that Strether is led to notice the "transformation unsurpassed" (1: 137) in Chad. Transposed from a gray, stern, material New England to a relaxed, bright, sensual Paris, Chad becomes, Strether feels, superbly refined, smooth, and "brown and thick and strong" (1: 152). His exaggeration of the alteration in Chad reflects his urgent desire to retrieve his own lost youth by living vicariously through Chad's life. What he sees in Chad is what he belatedly desires for himself and this misrecognition renders profoundly ironical what he says to himself when he first senses the "sharp rupture of identity" in Chad: "You could deal with a man as himself — you couldn't deal with him as somebody else" (1: 137). The "somebody else" he envisages in Chad is a version of the man he might have been. That Chad is not, as Strether imagines, completely changed is further evidenced by Maria's warning to him that Chad is "not so good" as he thinks (1: 171) and by little Bilham's announcement that his friend is not "really meant by nature to be quite so good" (1: 177).

In fact, Chad's change is an index to Strether's own changed relation to the general atmosphere of Paris. At this stage of his journey, the city and its theatrical

performance have enticed Strether into a realm where the boundary between the real and the fictive, self and other, is upset and where his dormant desires are aroused and displaced onto other people. Chad may impress him as culturally refined, but what strikes him most is Chad's masculinity, his "massive young manhood" (1: 156), and his being "the young man marked out by women" (1: 153). He sees in Chad "the hint of some self-respect, some sense of power, oddly perverted; something latent and beyond access, ominous and perhaps enviable." And then he finds a name for Chad: "an irreducible young pagan," which is "the thing most wanted at Woollett" (1: 156-157). The images through which Strether's consciousness is registered betray that the "absolute quality" he envies in Chad is his virility, i.e., his sexual prowess;[6] however, he seems to appreciate this prowess only when it exists in a state of pure potentiality rather than when it realizes itself in relation to women. At present, his body is even too weak for it and he is already growing anxious that he has gotten too close to the Thing, i.e., the female sexuality, that he would lose the object-cause of desire and consequently lose the lack that has been sustaining his desire.[7] Therefore, it is not surprising that in their conversation at the café after the play, Strether asks Chad if "there isn't any woman with you now" (1: 157). Still enmeshed in Woollett's sexual morality, he thinks any sexual involvements with women are "'horrors'" (1: 156) and acts of "coarseness" and "vulgarity" (1: 160). Therefore, the erotic desire he projects onto Chad is essentially a desire which detours the radical fusion of self and other implicated in sexuality and which keeps its erotic object at a distance, always ecstatically approaching it and yet always withholding itself from consummation/consumption.

4. "LIVE ALL YOU CAN; IT'S A MISTAKE NOT TO."

Not only Strether's desiring imagination but his senses of belatedness and loss are rendered in terms of theatrical imagery. His early suspicion that he is "too late" to take part in the literary movements of his youth which are now already "spent" and that even if the "playhouse" were still open, "his seat had at least fallen to somebody else" (1: 88), becomes a profound recognition under the pressure of one of the novel's most brilliant scenes, the party in the garden of the Italian sculptor Gloriani. There, under Chad's careful stage management, Strether is introduced to Marie de Vionnet and, later, to her daughter Jeanne. He is soon so stunned by the beauty, the "air of youth" (1: 209) and "common humanity" (1: 213) of Marie that, after she moves away from him, he withdraws into virtually private meditation. But he does so under the strong impact of two particular interludes which reinforce his sense of alienation and his inclination to stand aside. One is that Marie interchanges

[6] Chad here represents for Strether the paternal metaphor, i.e., the phallic standard that would channel and regulate his polymorphous drives. For a discussion of the paternal metaphor, see Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 276ff.

[7] Žižek succinctly defines the Lacanian concept of anxiety as follows: "anxiety occurs not when the object-cause of desire is lacking; it is not the lack of the object that gives rise to anxiety but, on the contrary, the danger of our getting too close to the object and thus losing the lack itself. Anxiety is brought on by the disappearance of desire" (*Looking Awry* 8).

pleasantries with a friend in his presence but intentionally fails to introduce him and then walks away on the arm of another man, whom Strether, an amateurish ambassador himself, feels must be "one of the [professional] ambassadors, who led her away with a trick of three words"—"a trick played with a social art which Strether ... felt himself no master" (1: 215). The other interlude is that he has just learned from little Bilham that Marie's husband is still living. Though the embarrassment caused by the "want of ceremony with which he had just been used" (1: 215) is rapidly suppressed by the information about her husband, both fill the "reservoir" of his insight which has been widening and overflowing in his consciousness. Both episodes produce Strether's recognition that the possibilities which he now encounters have come, for him, "simply too late," and that he has been excluded from them by the plot of fate. Later on, in an act reminding us of Waymarsh's "sacred rage," he says to little Bilham,

> Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had? This place and these impressions—mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I've seen at *his* place—well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped *that* into my mind. I see it now. I haven't done so enough before—and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I do see, at least.... What one loses one loses.... Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don't be, like me, without the memory of that illusion. (1: 217-218)

This passage, which James calls the "essence" of *The Ambassadors* (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1304), is based on the actual exclamation of his friend William Dean Howells to a young artist, Jonathan Sturges (*Notebooks* 140-141). For Strether, experience lost is nothing other than the experience of loss. In this respect, what Walter Bejamin says of Proust is also true of Strether: "[Proust] is filled with the insight that none of us has time to live the true dramas of the life that we are destined for. This is what ages us—this and noting else. The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the master, were not home" (213-214). It is a belatedness which disrupts the inevitability of every destiny, dislodges every claim to mastery of consciousness or imagination over history, and disappropriates every comfort of being "at home." Reminiscence becomes, in the first place, the recapitulation of what never did take place and, in the second place, the anticipation of what will never come. Situated between reminiscence and anticipation, the present is the invaginated space in which the two temporalities interface and in which desire is aroused and yet its gratification is perpetually deferred and displaced. For Benjamin, such a loss has the power to counter every form of nostalgia, and fuels the impatience for revolutionary change. Strether shares the same impatience and longing for revolution. As shall be discussed later, after discovering the "primal scene" of Chad and Marie, Paris becomes for him the revolutionary zone with its "smell of revolution, the smell of public temper—or perhaps simply the smell of blood" (2: 274). His reference to the revolutionary Paris will comport with his own rebellion against the clutches of Woollett, and the smell of blood, no matter how it flows, is for him the sign of vitality lacking in the repression of his New England "prison-house" (1: 66), a heritage he has carried with him to the battle field of the

Great Revolution—Paris.

Strether's desire to salvage something from his fate by projecting his desire onto other people takes a nonrhetorical form in the same episode when he looks across the garden to find a little lady conversing with Gloriani and wonders whether he is actually "*in*" their world by virtue of being thus related to them by mere act of his observation (1: 219). His next reflections make clear that he is in their world only by means of envies which place them beyond his immediate access. He then senses that "there was something in the great world covertly tigerish, which came to him across the lawn and the charming air as a waft from the jungle," and he finds that the "glossy tiger" is Chad himself (1: 219). "With a consummate calculation," Chad—another beast in the jungle—is about to present Jeanne de Vionnet to Strether's "vision." As his feelings quicken while he imagines being like Chad, he fancies that Chad is presenting his "virtuous attachment" and seeking his prospective stepfather's "blessing" (1: 220). Strether's erotic desire is invested in the object under his gaze. However, his double consciousness is also at work in his imaginative pairing of Chad and Jeanne. In his perceiving Chad as a male tiger, he betrays his envy of Chad's masculinity and virility; however, in his effort to put the union within the frame of virtuous attachment, he shows his fear of the profuse expenditure that waits on the other side of woman's abyss. This double movement of his consciousness is aptly registered in the following analogy: "[Chad] had plucked this blossom [Jeanne]; he had kept it over-night in water; and at least he held it up to wonder he did enjoy his effect" (1: 221).

5. DESEXUALIZING THE FEMALE BODY

Strether's "lust of the eye" (1: 119) can be further understood in relation to his effort to put the female body within an imaginative framing that would deprive it of its aggressive sexuality and reduce it to a mere object for erotic speculation. For Strether, as well as for the unnamed narrator in *The Sacred Fount*, the sexuality of the autonomous desiring woman (that is, the woman as a subject) would lead to the unlimited expenditure of a man's energy and eventually jeopardize the lucidity and sovereignty of his consciousness. To avoid such disaster, Strether tends to reduce woman to a mere object, a dead sign within his erotic frame. A case in point is his reflections on the youth and beauty of Jeanne. In their first encounter at Gloriani's garden, Jeanne strikes him as "so slim and fresh and fair," (1: 221) and "too soft, too unknown for direct dealing" that one can only "gaze at [her] as at a picture, quite staying one's own hand" (1: 222). When they meet at Chad's apartment, Strether romanticizes about her: "She was fairly beautiful to him—a faint pastel in an oval frame; he thought of her already as of some lurking image in a long gallery, the portrait of a small old-time princess of whom nothing was known but that she had died young" (1: 259). Already setting up Jeanne within his death-dealing frame, Strether proceeds to de-sexualize her: he cannot bear her with the "question of a young man," for one does not treat such a girl as a "maid-servant suspected of a 'follower'" (1: 260). At last, he finds his erotic desire mirrored in her desire that is being directed towards him: "She had dipped into the waiting medium

at last and found neither surge nor chill—nothing but the small splash she could herself make in the pleasant warmth, nothing but the safety of dipping and dipping again" (1: 260). As the image of the gentle water flow indicates, Jeanne represents for Strether's fantasy the best possible means of gratifying his erotic desire without provoking his fear of women's "abysses." For, entrapped in his imaginative frame, she is not sexually aggressive and can be easily satisfied with a mere dipping and pleasant warmth without ever demanding the orgiastic "surge" which Strether is afraid of.[8]

Strether's "lust of the eyes" (1: 119) is closely related to his fetishism. The fetish as a form of obsession epitomizes a departure from the sexual norm as it distracts the subject from the human element altogether, calling attention instead to an inanimate object or a particular body part. An insufficient interest in "normal" sexual aim is thought to be the precondition of fetishism. What replaces the normal sexual object is an object that, however much it might resemble the sexual norm, is entirely unsuited to serve procreation (Freud 7: 153-55). It is in this light that we can interpret Strether's fetishism. For example, he enjoys a singular fascination for women's clothing. There is the episode of the red velvet band which Maris wears: "What was it but an uncontrolled perception that his friend's velvet band somehow added, in her appearance, to value of every other item?" (1: 50)[9]. However, Strether's pleasant perception is soon replaced by self-condemnation, for he finds the attraction "frivolous, no doubt idiotic, and above all unexpected" (1: 51). Rather than placing him comfortably in the world of men who desire women, the attraction to the band dislocates him, putting him at odds with the normal masculine behavior: "What, certainly, had a man's work in the world to do with red velvet band?" (1: 51). The frivolity and uselessness in his obsession with the band is set off in vivid contrast with the Protestant work ethic and utilitarianism represented by Waymarsh. While watching the play with Maria, Strether is distracted by other articles of clothing, identifying two characters in the play not by their acting skills, but by their dresses: the actress wears a yellow frock, the actor is in "perpetual evening dress" (1: 53).

On the other hand, Strether's fetishistic obsession with clothing is complicated by his voyeurism. Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway by which libidinal excitation is aroused. This pleasure in looking, which Freud calls "scopophilia" (7: 157), derives from the concealment of the human

[8] Strether's relationship with Jeanne bears similarities to the relationship between James and his cousin Minnie Temple. Miranda Seymour contends that "insofar as James was ever in love with a woman, he was in love his witty, charming cousin Minnie" (169). And, since James had been straitlaced and puritanical about sex, this relationship succeeded only because it did not demand sexual intimacy. James could enjoy a degree of eroticism apart from heterosexual conventions: "He adored her—he worshipped her. She had been a Diana in the temple of his life" (Edel, *The Master* 499). With adulthood James saw a possible corruption of their innocent affair if Minnie should choose to marry. However, Minnie died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five, allowing James to perpetuate her innocence and youth and, as Edel puts it, to turn her into an "icon, a goddess of the mind" (*Letters* 4: xiii). James seemed "almost to welcome her death because he could take total possession of her in his mind and memory" (Edel, *The Master* 110), and after securing her innocence with his imagination, James could enjoy a relationship that was now incontestably platonic.

[9] For an interesting discussion of Maria's neckband in association with Strether's desiring imagination, see David Mcwhirter 55-60.

body. As Freud says, "The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts" (7: 156). Or, it can be diverted or sublimated in the direction of art, though, Freud hastens to add, it "is usual for most normal people to linger to some extent over the intermediate sexual aim of a looking that has a sexual tinge to it" (7: 156-157). Therefore, art sublimates human beings' sexual desire only to the extent that some residue of that desire still clings to the product of art, resisting sublimation. This dialectic between repression and the return of the repressed produces pleasure for those who appreciate an art product. Elsewhere, considering this pleasure within the theoretical framework of libidinal economy, Freud calls it an "*incentive bonus*," a "*fore-pleasure*," which is offered us in order to "make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources" (9: 153).

In his *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes uses photographs to show that the erotic desire derives in part from the concealment of the potentially erotic subject. He distinguishes the erotic from the pornographic by stressing the necessary presence of clothing to conceal and thereby to eroticize the human body. He cites Mapplethorpe as an example: the latter "shifts his close-ups of genitalia from the pornographic to the erotic by photographing the fabric of underwear at very close range" (41-42). Without this concealment, the subject would enter the realm of the pornographic where nothing is left for imagination: the pornographic photograph is always a homogenous and "naïve" photograph constituted by the presentation of only one thing--sex; it does not have a "secondary," "untimely" object which manages to "half conceal, delay, or distract" (41).

The same dialectic of concealment and revelation in eroticism[10] can be located in the way Strether gazes at Marie during their encounter at Chad's apartment,

> Her bare shoulders and arms were white and beautiful; the materials of her dress, a mixture, as he supposed, of silk and crape, were of a silvery grey so artfully composed as to give an impression of warm splendor; and round her neck she wore a collar of large old emeralds, the green note of which was dimly repeated, at other points of her apparel, in embroidery, in enamel, in satin, in substances and textures vaguely rich. Her head, extremely fair and exquisitely festal, was like a happy fancy, a notion of the antique, on an old precious medal, some silver coin of the Renaissance ... (1: 270)

Concealment eroticizes the object under scopophilic (or, more precisely, scopo-phallic) gaze. Indeed, Strether, high in the wild flight of his erotic imagination, piles on Marie's body nearly all possible textile fabric, colors, and precious metals and stones—only in order to uncover her,

> He could have compared her to a goddess still engaged in a morning cloud, or to a sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge. [She] was like Cleopatra in the play, indeed various and multifold.... She was an obscure person, a muffled person one day, and a showy person, an

[10] For an interesting analysis of the dialectic of concealment and revelation in narrative and its relationship to the representation of the female body, see Brooks, *Body Work*, esp. 8-22.

> uncovered person the next. He thought of Madame de Vionnet tonight as showy and uncovered ... (1: 270-71)

In this passage, Strether's visual excitement is being increased in the process of his stripping off, in his fantasy, the multiple layers of clothes and accessories that cover Marie's body. However, this uncovering process is not yet completed, for the nether parts of the goddess of Eros whom Strether has invoked are still submerged in the surging summer waves, tantalizing his erotic desire. Furthermore, the etymology of the word "nymph" shows his unconscious urge to transgress onto the ultimate and the most sacred taboo—the female genitalia, for, in addition to its mythological meaning, "nymph" is also "nymphas," which is "the labia minora of the vulva, situated within the labia majora" (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* 1: 1959).

Strether's transatlantic mission to rescue Chad from the influence of "bad" women is, in fact, completed at the moment when he delivers his ambassadorial message to Chad at their first meeting. Therefore, what moves the plot of the novel forwards is his desire to know the truth about the affair between Chad and Marie. However, Strether's drive for knowledge is complicated by his will to ignorance. This double moment between knowledge and ignorance is similar to that between concealment and revelation. Then, it is no accident that Strether thinks of himself as a dresser of a naked doll (2: 266) after dis-covering, in the river scene, the embarrassing "nakedness" of Marie and Chad's affair.

Ironically, the dis-covering process begins with Strether's act of dressing up the "naked truth" about Chad and Marie. Strether modifies his view of Chad's love affair twice in the novel, from the original view of its being sexually corrupted, through the view of its being a virtuous attachment, to the reconfirmation of the original view. What has remained unchanged is his obsession with and his extra-moral fear of genital sexuality and unlimited expenditure it may incur. In the earliest phase, still clinging to the New England moral standards, Strether says to Maria that Chad is being held under the influence of a "bad" woman. Later, when little Bilham tells him that Chad is not free to return home because of a "virtuous attachment," Strether obtains "almost a new lease if life." However, this first reaction is counterbalanced by a queer sense of disappointment: he finds the "taste of the lees rising as usual into his draught" from the bottle of the "wine of experience," for his "imagination [has] already dealt with his young friend's assertion" (1: 180). His double reaction to little Bilham's "virtuous attachment" corresponds to the double movement of his erotic imagination. On the one hand, he wishes Bilham's phrase to mean *innocent*, which is precisely the word he is to use later, while Bilham means the attachment is neither debilitating nor vulgar. On the other hand, due to his misreading of the phrase, he feels lightly disappointed at the prospect that there will be no "bad," that is, sexually licentious, woman to tantalize his erotic imagination. The same double moment of his desiring imagination also works in his holding off, "as on a small principle of pride," from permitting Bilham to mention the name of Chad's attachment, for he wishes to "make with this the great point that Chad's virtuous attachments [are] none of his business" (1: 181). However, while assuming an appearance of disinterestedness as the unnamed narrator in *The Sacred Fount* often does, he does anticipate the "further luxury of

much private astonishment" (1: 182) and the enjoyment of his talk about the virtuous attachment with his confidante Maria.

The movement of Strether's double consciousness is further rendered in relation to the lust of the eyes in his next meeting with his Maria. When he reveals his own uncertainty by charging Maria with not believing in the innocence of Chad's attachment, she replies,

> "I don't pretend to know anything about it. Everything's possible. We must see."
>
> "See?" he echoed with a groan. "Haven't we seen enough?"
>
> "*I* haven't," she smiled.
>
> "But do you suppose then little Bilham has lied?"
>
> It made him almost turn pale. "Find out any *more*?"
>
> He had dropped on a sofa for dismay; but she seemed, as she stood over him, to have the last word. "Wasn't what you came out for to find out *all*?" (1: 188-89)

It is the multiple possibilities, harbored in the many attachments and embodied in the resemblances among them, that become the subject of the novel, and it is the combination, in Strether's "new lease of life," of action and vision--the mission to "do" and the obsession to "see"--that makes the main thread of his adventure.

Many Jamesian critics have pointed out Strether's inveterate tendency to ignore the outside reality and to indulge himself in his own imagination. For example, Quentin Anderson's tough-minded reading of the novel argues that for all Strether's desire to intensify experience, his imagination works on the double principle of willed expansion and willed exclusion. He wills not to see what he wishes not to contemplate, and sexuality is among the items on the excluded side (213). For Anna Kventsel, *The Ambassadors* is the most negative of the novels despite its comic surface: faced with the sexuality of Madame de Vionnet, Strether obeys a "deep-seated Puritan impulse and withdraws into spiritual insularity" (42). Indeed, this is Strether's position in the novel, for, neglecting the warning from little Bilham, Maria, and Miss Barrace, he believes in his own fantasized account about the miraculous transformation of Chad and the innocent nature of the latter's relation with Marie. He refuses to acknowledge the possibility of such an illicit relationship until he is confronted with irrefutable evidence of their sexual liaison.

It is Strether's desire for and fear of genital sexuality that makes him refuse to see the real nature of the affair of Chad and Marie. However, though this presupposition gives Strether a "new lease of life" (it seems rather ironical that his life depends on his self-willed ignorance of the life-giving activity — sexual intimacy), he does, during the interval, sense vaguely that he has been "used" by Chad and anticipates that something "disagreeable" and "intolerable" might happen and clear up his situation: "He failed quite to see how his situation could clear up at all logically except by some turn of events that would give him the pretext of disgust. He was building from day to day on the possibility of disgust, but each day brought forth meanwhile a new and more engaging bend of the road" (1: 256-57). As Strether's suspicion of something morally corrupted in Chad's affair gradually disappears, his own "virtuous attachment," which is the only form of attachment he seems to be capable of, to Marie, becomes deeper. Marie's youth, beauty, variety, and culture have been so far very alluring to Strether, but it is only after he is

certain of there having not been "any freedom used about her" (1: 210) that he feels safe to "plunge" into her stream and, finally, to step into her "boat."

The intimacy between Strether and Marie reaches its climax in the Notre Dame episode. In the Church, he contemplates a lurking female figure sitting within the focus of the shrine that reminds him of "some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written" (2: 6). The figure later coming out of Strether's literary framing is Marie herself. The image of Marie sitting before the glimmering altar so impresses Strether that he thinks the attachment between Chad and her must have been an innocent one: "If it wasn't innocent why did she haunt the churches?" (2: 10). This framing has completely eliminated the threat of Marie's latent sexuality that Strether is ready for his "plunge."

The Notre Dame episode abounds in the imagery of spending and eating, onto which Strether's erotic desire is displaced. He tells Marie about the purchase—another act of his "sacred rage"—he made of Hugo's works in "seventy bound volumes" (2: 7). He describes it as "giving for once in a way to the joy of life" (2: 7), and the "exorbitance of his purchase" as "out of proportion" to any other "plunge" (2: 10). And, more significantly, while he is thus speaking to Marie, he feels at the instant he is "plunging" into her. Although, in the context in which it appears, "plunge" denotes Strether's decision to help Marie get out of her situation without taking into account the risk he may have to take, its sexual implication is made clear and further strengthened by the following analogy of Strether to a firm object: "if he happened to affect her as a firm object she could hold on by, he wouldn't jerk himself out of her reach.... 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" (2: 11).[11]

The next act Strether takes after he thinks he is recuperating his masculinity, though only partially, is to ask Maries to lunch in a riverside restaurant which he knows but where she has never been. The fact that he feels a "deep" pleasure on learning that she has never been "initiated" by Chad to that famous restaurant (2: 12) indicates that he is unconsciously longing to take over Chad's role as Marie's lover. However, since at this stage of his rejuvenation he is too late, or rather, too early and not firm enough for an Oedipal struggle, he can only enjoy Marie by way of a lunch with her. Therefore, it is not surprising that, as it is registered by Strether's desiring imagination, this episode is tinged with infantile-oral fantasy. Marie tells him that, in dining with him at restaurant, she would risk "smashing" her duties, but she has her right to her "snatch of scandal" when she is prepared to "pay" for the "costly order" (2: 13). As the meal proceeds, Strether feels that "for an hour, in the

[11] That Strether is not "firm" and "erect" enough in either moral or physical sense is a recurring motif in the novel. Erectness is a physical feature that he envies both in Chad and in Waymarsh. During their first encounter in Paris, among the first things Strether says to Chad is that he still remembers that when Chad was "in jackets and knickerbockers," he had "tremendously stout legs" (1: 148). Applied to Waymarsh, "erectness" carries strong moral connotations. When talking of Chad with Bilham and Miss Barrace at Chad's apartment, Strether feels uneasy at Wyamarsh's presence, for it reminds him that by associating pleasantly with these admiring friends of Chad's, he is condoning the impropriety of Chad's way of life. As the narrator observes, "Our friend's final predicament was that he himself was sitting down, for the time, with them, and there was a supreme moment at which, compared with his collapse, Waymarsh's erectness affected him as really high" (1: 117-118).

matter of letting himself go, of diving deep, [he] was to feel he had touched bottom" (2: 13). He is losing his grip over the situation, giving up his "holding off" (2: 14) and submitting himself completely to the superb sensuous experience provided by Marie. This movement from holding-off to spending is further illustrated by his privately entertaining the idea of proposing a breakfast to Marie, for he thinks it is "clearly better to suffer as a sheep than as a lamb. One might as well perish by sword as by famine" (2: 15).

In his notebooks, James carefully chooses a word that has both esthetic and sexual connotations in relation to Strether: He is "disenchanted without having known any greater enchantments, enchanters, or, above all, enchantresses" (543). James recognizes that one cause of failure in life, as it is in "The Beast in the Jungle" or in "The Jolly Corner," is the missed opportunity for sexual jouissance. Although in the Notre Dame episode Strether does not really achieve consummation with Marie, he does consume a "costly" lunch with her and obtains substitutional gratification from his meal, his walk, and his talk with her. As he tells her, "I've had ... a lovely time. Nothing in it has been more lovely than this happy meeting with you—in these fantastic conditions to which you've so delightfully consented. I've a sense of success" (2: 20).

6. THE EROTICIZATION OF SPACE

Strether's sense of guilt grows with his increasing infatuation with Marie. After declining to follow Mrs. Newsome's demand for an immediate return, he has received no letters or telegrams from her. Her silence intensifies her presence as an importunate "ghost": "He walked about with her, sat with her, drove with her and dined face-to-face with her" (2: 47). With the pending arrival of the Pococks, who are to take over his mission of salvation, his desire for and fear of punishment grow more intense. Sarah Pocock visits him in his waking dream" and he sees himself "under her direction, recommitted to Woollett as juvenile offenders are committed to reformatories" (2: 61). The analogy of "juvenile offenders" aptly combines the theme of Strether's rejuvenation with that of his transgression of the Woollett interdiction. Under the threat of impending punishment and in his anticipation of his concession to the punishment, his desire to see Marie and to act in an "interested" way becomes irrepressible (2: 62).

The later sections of the novel draw on the deepening intimacy between Strether and Marie. Mrs. Pocock's arrival in Paris increases Strether's sense of guilt and consequently accelerates his flight into fantasy. When Marie greets him familiarly in the presence of Sarah Pococks and Waymarsh, Strether feels that "she thus publicly drew him into her boat" and that he should affect them as having "launched in a relation in which he had never been launched at all," though in fact his sole license has been to "cling with intensity to the brink, not to dip so much as a toe into the flood." The metaphors of boat and boating imply Strether's passionate interest in Marie--even though he is not exactly sure where the interest lies--and suggests a switch from his transatlantic mission into Marie's inland waterway: "he took up an oar and since he was to have the credit of pulling, pulled" (2: 94-95).

In a subsequent visit to Marie's apartment, Strether anticipates his unconscious fantasy object—the maternal body. He feels certain that he is in Marie's boat and has been for many hours conscious of the "movement of the vessel itself" (2: 111). Indeed, Strether's entry into Marie's antechamber, as Gert Buelens says of *The American Scene*, "displays a deep sensibility to the spatiality of desire" (301) and enacts his return to the female body. Marie occupies the first floor of an old house, to which visitors have access from an old clean court, which is "large and open, full of revelations ... of the habit of privacy, the peace of intervals, [and] the dignity of distance and approaches" (1: 243). Her "noble old" apartment has a "succession" of three rooms, the first two of which, "on entering," are smaller than the last but enlarge the office of the antechamber and enrich the "sense of approach" (2: 125). The architectural features of Marie's apartment, together with the recurrent water imagery associated with her, suggest both external and internal features of the female body, into which Strether desires to "plunge." In Marie's apartment, basking again in the atmosphere of great events he associates with her, Strether stops and looks back to see "the whole thing made of vista, of dim historical shades, [and] of faint, far away cannon-roar of the great Empire" (2: 125). These architectural and military metaphors, while hinting at some past glory, actually shield the elaborate fantasies Strether associates with Marie's apartment. They create an illusion of potency he wishes to regain and suggest the female body he wishes to return to. The high vista, melancholy and sweet, yawns like a cavernous passage to a painfully sweet memory of a lost object in his dim past. The imagery of navigation, as shall be discussed later, builds to its finest irony in the rural scene in which Strether discovers how embarrassing it is to think that one is in someone's boat when another already occupies the only vacant seat.

7. THE GREEN-COVERED REVIEW, THE LEMON-COLORED VOLUMES, AND THE LAMBINET PAINTING

Strether's return to Paris after thirty years of separation is an opportunity for him to retrieve his lost youth. Back at Woollett he is only the editor of a review sponsored by Mrs. Newsome that deals with the topics of economics, politics and ethics. As he tells Maria, his name on the review's green cover is his "one presentable little scrap of an identity"; as Mrs. Newsome's "tribute to the ideal," it rescues a little from "the wreck of [his] hopes and ambitions, [and] the refuse-heap of [his] disappointments and failures" (1: 65-66) and assigns him a place within the Puritan capitalist system of exchange[12]. His return to Paris, therefore, is not only a return in space but also a return in time—a return to his youthful imagination which had been primed by the French novels—"the lemon-colored volumes" (1: 86, 246; 2: 228). As a contrast to the green-covered review, the lemon-colored volume

[12] For a discussion of the relationship between Strether's identity as an individual and Woollett's commercial system, see Siobhan Peiffer, esp., 100-101. For an analysis of Mrs. Newsome as the embodiment of "a spectacularly unappealing form of American modernity rendered as sheer disenchantment, rationality, and control," see Mark Goble, esp. 413-414.

designates a fantasized space and time in which libidinal drives are not yet differentiated and regulated according to the reality principle and in which the body is not yet traversed by the system of symbolic exchange and the law of reproduction. Strether's propensity to overindulge himself in infantile oral and visual pleasures, does not merely indicate that, being too late for heterosexual pleasure, he can only obtain substitutional gratification from these perversities. Rather paradoxically, being too early for heterosexual pleasure, his libidinal drives flow into whatever channels he chances upon.

However, throughout the novel, this return to the infantile-oral and infantile-visual has been thwarted by the phallic penetration represented by Chad's virility. For example, in the mellowest lamplight of Chad's apartment, Strether notices "a novel half-cut, the novel lemon-colored and tender, with the ivory knife athwart it like the dagger in a contadina's hair" (2: 228). The new novel takes on, as Peter Brooks puts it, a "slightly sinister and melodramatic inference" from the knife ("Henry James and Dirty French Novels" 210). The violent erotic image evoked by the knife reveals the transforming power of Strether's consciousness. The lemon-colored novel suggests that he has a strong longing for the infantile-oral gratification it evokes, of a woman, tender, breast exposed. But he is intimidated by the penetrating power of the dagger, thwarted in his attempt to yield himself to the oral pleasure the mother may give, just as he feels traumatized by his past failures, which are also represented by the lemon-colored volumes which he purchased on an earlier visit thirty years ago but had never read (1: 86-87) and which have since been replaced by the green-colored magazine he edits under Mrs. Newsome's supervision.

Strether's rejuvenation has carried him far beyond the juvenile period and makes his return a too-early return of his second childhood. In the beginning chapter, he is likened to a child whom Maria leads "forth into the world" (1: 13). Gradually he is weaned from the flow of sensual experience furnished by Maria: he no longer holds out "his small thirsty cup to the spout of her pail," because other "fountains" have flowed out for him (2: 48). Maria also senses this change in their relationship when she announces at the structural center of the novel that Strether is now able to "toddle alone" (2: 39). At that point he declares to her "I'm youth.... I began to be young ... the moment I met you at Chester" (2: 50), but he also makes clear that his youth is not only a tardy but a premature one, a "tribute" to youth derived from "the lives, the conditions, the feelings of other persons" (2: 51). This misrecognition of other people's youth as his own is an example of his propensity for taking other's body and desire as his own. What lies behind this misrecognition is the infant child's tendency for unsettling the boundary between self and other (Lacan, *Écrits* 75-78). The fact that Strethen has not yet outgrown this behavior mode of the infant child reveals that, even though he is learning to toddle along, he can hardly "erect" himself and be "firm" enough for an Oedipal struggle that would help him solve the riddle posed by the "sphinxes' heads" (1: 244) decorating Marie's apartment and thus empower him to genital sexuality. It is not accidental, then, that in his speech to little Bilham he compares one's consciousness to a "helpless jelly" poured into the "affair of life" and takes its form (1: 218). As he is incapable of replacing Chad as Marie's lover, he can only, as he says, "watch the

play from the pit" (2: 233), and see his own desire formed and performed in the heterosexual romance of Chad and Marie.

The excursion Strether takes to the countryside is his return to the pre-Oedipal stage, in which libidinal drives are not yet positioned and regulated by the law set up by civilization. And yet, at the end of the episode this return is blocked by the primal scene[13] symbolically performed by Chad and Marie and eventually leads to the destruction of Strether's theory of virtuous attachment and to the collapse of his erotic imagination. The excursion is taken not really at random as it would first appear but under the influence of a very old wishful fantasy—the fantasy of catching the train, as he told little Bilham earlier, he had missed in his youth (1: 217). Strether gets off the train "as surely as if to keep an appointment," and feels "he could alight anywhere ... on catching a suggestion of the peculiar note required" (2: 246). The note is an atmosphere reminiscent of a small Lambinet landscape. The image of the Lambinet painting[14] bears on the combined theme of Strether's financial poverty and his lack of virility, for, as he remembers, he saw the painting many years ago, at a Boston gallery, for a sale at "a price he had never felt so poor as on having to recognize ... as beyond a dream of possibility," even though it had made him for the moment "overstep the modesty of nature" (2: 245-246). On the other hand, the painting now offers him an "oblong window" with which he can frame the world of nature, as he is used to framing the female body within his desiring imagination.

The Lambinet painting, whose subject is a scene of trees, rushes, and river, is described as "a land of fancy ... the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letter" (2: 245). Its landscape suggests the primal mother, who is the giver of plenitude and unlimited satisfaction and who is the "matrix" that gives birth to the lemon-colored volumes. Strether fantasizes that the painting disposes its enclosing lines, frames the surrounding scenery, and turns it into a picture which he can legitimately and safely direct his eroticized/eroticizing gaze towards. In this scene, as well as in other parts of the novel, the pervasiveness of the images of looking and seeing and the continual emphasis on seeing as the supreme metaphor for understanding suggest a great weight of unconscious meaning. For Strether, looking and understanding are the less dangerous substitutes for acting and doing. Thus by framing the natural scene within the Lambinet canvas he can enjoy the rich

[13] The primal scene is a child's viewing or fantasizing parental intercourse. Whether the scene is fantasized or psychologically experienced is not important, because it is psychologically real to the child. The perception of the scene may not in itself have been traumatic; it may have remained an unconscious memory until a new link between it and the later sexual fantasies of the child occurs. Ned Lukacher has defined the scene as "an ontologically undecidable intertextual event that is situated in the differential space between memory and imaginative construction, between archival verification and interpretive freeplay" (24)

As a manifestation of the oedipal complex, fear of castration may be projected onto the primal scene fantasy, particularly the frightening sight of the father's genitals. Voyeurs are often fixated on experience such as the primal scene that aroused their castration anxiety. See Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, in Vol. 17 of *The Standard Edition* 48-60, for an extended discussion of the status of the Wolfman's primal scene; see also Silverman 154-159.

[14] For an interesting discussion of *The Ambassadors* in relation to "high modernist framing," see Caws 148-159.

esthetic and sensuous experience of French life, which has so far distracted and frightened him.

Safe within the frame of dream and fantasy, Strether seems to enjoy a great sense of liberty and license, indulging himself in infantile oral pleasures: "Strether heard his lips, for the first time in French air ... emit sound of expressive intention without fear of his company" (2: 248). Finally released from the surveillance system of New England and reclining on a grassy hillside, half sleeping and half waking, he enters a world of autoerotic fantasy about Marie. Although the "special shyness" (2: 250) deriving from the Woollett interdiction still makes him act carefully towards Marie, the last two occasions of visiting her have, he muses, filled him with a sense of "fullness and frequency" (2: 249). He thinks of "the delightful facility, with such a woman, of arriving at a new tone ... of all the tones she might make possible if one were to try her" (2: 250). The analogy of a responsive musical instrument aptly implies his erotic fantasy about Marie, as it did once in relation to her daughter. Finally his fantasy reaches the climax: "how had their [his and Marie's] time together slipped along so smoothly, mild but now slow, and melting, liquefying into his happy illusion of idleness?" (2: 251). This melting and liquefying, which intentionally echoes his earlier comparison of consciousness to "helpless jelly" (1: 218) in his speech to little Bilham, is the culmination of his erotic reverie about Marie — a climax, as it might well be understood to be, finally reached after he has, under "his poplars," entered Marie's "tin mould" (1: 218) and "rubbed off "his "special shyness" (2: 249).

However, even in his fantasy Strether still acts rather passively and timidly: he is acted upon rather acts, as his recumbent position indicates. Although he imagines himself having a successful relationship with the woman he adores, the fantasy he experiences here suggests an idea more primal than genital sexuality. His childlike passivity implies that he is both too late and too early to assert his male aggressiveness. Consequently, he can hardly enjoy a "normal" life and take over Chad's role as Marie's lover. Therefore, his melting and liquefying suggests a body without organs, that is, a primal body which is not yet inscribed in the order of the symbolic.[15] This body—this "helpless jelly"—consists of overflowing libidinal drives longing to unite with the maternal body.

For the moment Strether feels himself a part of the bright scene of life, safely inside "the oblong gilt frame," instead of being a dim, excluded spectator. At the end of this enchanted afternoon "in the picture," he finds himself at a small inn in an ambiguous watery landscape that echoes the earlier melting and liquefying. Now out of this pre-oedipal landscape rises a "stout white capped deep-voice woman" — the innkeeper (2: 252). With her stout body and deep voice, this woman seems both male and female. She may suggest to Strether's fetishistic gazing eyes the primal maternal body, a body prior to sexual differentiation and, therefore, to the oedipal. The scene in the inn is further rendered in terms of Strether's infantile oral drive. The dinner the innkeeper offers to give him is described as a "comfortable climax" (2: 253) for his "appetite" (2: 254). And she offers to "serve" him at the inn garden,

[15] Lacan's use of the symbolic order aims to compare the structure of the unconscious with that of language and to show how the human subject is inserted into a pre-established order which is itself symbolic. See Wilden 262-70; Lemaire 72-92.

at the edge of which a small and "primitive" pavilion almost overhangs the water (2: 255). Strether feels comfortable and confident, for, still remaining within the frame of the Lambinet, he can enjoy his primal fantasy. Thus, though he may still cherish the dream of a possible oedipal victory over his father-surrogate Chad, he has actually withdrawn to the pre-oedipal stage, gratifying his infantile oral desire in an imagined fusion with the body of the primal mother.

8. THE UNTIMELY RETURN OF THE PRIMAL SCENE

Later, Strether sits down near a landing where some small boats are tied up:

> the view had an emptiness that made one of the boat suggestive. Such a river set one afloat almost before one could take up the oars—the idle play of which would be moreover the aid to the full impression. This perception went so far as to bring him to his feet; but that movement, in turn, made him feel afresh that he was tired, and while he leaned against a post and continued to look out he saw something that gave him a sharp arrest. (2: 255)

The boat on the river suggests for Strether the sensuous pleasure life might have offered him, had he had been brave enough to launch the boat, instead of merely watching from the riverbank. However, he is already too late/too early for life and even for standing erect for the moment, for he has to lean against a post in order to watch, an act which is in sharp contrast with an earlier act of rubbing off his modesty under "his poplars." Furthermore, the forceful phrase "a sharp arrest"[16] in the passage carries strong connotations of violence, transgression, and punishment, and foreshadows that what he is about to see is forbidden:

> [A] boat [advanced] round the bend and contain[ed] a man who held the paddles and a lady, at the stern, with a pink parasol. It was suddenly as if these figures ... had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day, and had now drifted into sight, with the slow current, on purpose to fill up the measure. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent—that this wouldn't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it ... (2: 256)

The end of Strether's journey to the pre-oedipal is the return of the primal scene,[17] the "catastrophe" (2: 253) he has been trying to avert and at the same time longing

[16] For an expert reading of the word "arrest" in relation to the "non-narrative moment" in *The Ambassadors* and to James's repudiation of the totalizing narratives of nineteenth-century convention, see Sarah Wilson 513-514, 529.

[17] As George Smith aptly suggests, James's middle and late phases "precede the main themes of Freud and Lacan—namely, those that comprise the Law of the Father and deferred action" (62). He says that from the river scene Strether "recollects the trauma that was repressed in the unconscious: not only that he saw that 'they knew how to do it' but that he was caught watching—exposed as a voyeur, arrested under the Law of the Father, and resubjectified as an exhibitionist—which is to say, again, that Strether has reexperienced the primal scene" (63). Anne Golomb Hoffman also detects in the river scene the "embodiment of the child in the adult" and "a point of intersection between the literary and the psychoanalytic" (419).

to "see" in his fantasy. This passage is a superb example of James's technique of "circumsexualocution," in which the genital fixations of the characters are transformed into socially acceptable forms, such as double entendres and innuendoes (Davidson 354). Although the subject of this passage is boating skills, the language evokes a hidden meaning that supplements and gradually replaces its surface meaning. The man holding the paddles and the woman with a "pink parasol" suggest the primal scene. And the words "expert, familiar, frequent" imply the easy gratification of a successful sexual relationship that has aroused in Strether the sense of loss and impotence, for he has been unable to do "it" or even he does not know how to do it. As he stretches his eyes and watches, the boat seems again to "drift wide, the oarsman letting it go" (2: 256). The couple in rhythmical motion have reached the climatic moment of wavering: "She had taken in something as a result of which their course had wavered, and it continued to waver while they stood off." Then, Strether's scopo-phallic gaze is directed towards the lady's parasol, which makes "so fine a point in the shining scene" (2: 257). Thus, what is lacked in the Lambinet is fulfilled by the couple floating on the river.

However, the very moment Strether's imaginative framing is completed is also the moment it is destroyed. What has shattered this frame is the ultimate but primal truth about Chad and Marie's love affair—their illicit sexual liaison.[18] This "naked truth" now for the first time intrudes itself on the heretofore pure stage of Strether's speculative imagination. This dis-covery has its immediate shocking effect on him: he feels that "the sharp fantastic crisis had popped up as if in a dream and it had only to last the few seconds to make him feel it as quite horrible" (2: 257-258). It is horrible not only because it brings to light what he has repressed so far--the sexual liaison of Chad and Marie, but also because it arouses his fear and anticipation of castration that is often associated with the primal scene. This fearful anticipation is suggested a few lines later by the repeated use of the word "violence": as Strether feels "relief ... superseding mere violence," he goes "down to the water under this odd impression as of violence averted—the violence of their

[18] Many scholars have addressed the river scene in terms of Jamesian desire. David McWhirter writes, "The very thing that completes the picture is also the thing that rips the picture from its frame and restores it to time; the filling of the void in the picture eliminates that space where desire and imagination have lived" (70). In his queer reading of the scene, Eric Haralson points out that Strether's fixation on Marie de Vionnet's sexuality might well express his longing to place himself in her position as Chad's lover (118). According to Roxana Pana-Oltean, Strether's overstepping "the oblong gilt frame" is itself a "topos of painting and... a well-known *trompe l'oeil* of the masters... and the duality of simulacra and reality is reconfirmed as a play of impressions, a painterly technique" (193). Gert Buelens and Bart Eeckhout relate Pana-Oltean's observation to the crucial fact that Strether's journey to the French countryside "is not just an expedition in search of the picturesque—not just the culmination of his aesthetic education—but also springs from an urge to relive a frustrated desire for possession"; therefore, "when Strether peoples his idyllic painting with the ruins of his own potential sexual gratification with Marie de Vionnet, he is satisfying his craving for the reiteration of a foundational sense of loss" (44). But how can Strether lose the small Lambinet he never possessed? And, how can he mourn over the loss of the sexual jouissance he never had with Marie? Then, what is lost in a loss of what he never possessed, if it is not the loss of the vision of Marie's sexual plenitude? In his reconstruction of the river scene, Strether actually transforms the sense of loss into that of lack—both the lack in himself and the lack in the other—and finally traverses his sexual fantasy and reaches the emptiness that is at the core of his existence. For a discussion of the difference between loss and lack, see Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 41-42; for a discussion of traversing the fantasy, see Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 32-33.

having 'cut' him out there in the eye of nature" (2: 258). The triple repetition of "violence" overrides his professed sense of having "averted" it. Therefore, his denial only affirms his feeling of having been "cut," in the double sense of "ignored" and "wounded," by being excluded from the lovers' intimacy. On the other hand, "cut" also suggests fearful anticipation of punishment for his voyeuristic gazing, for he has "the worrying thought of their perhaps secretly suspecting him of having plotted this coincidence" (2: 259).

The "deep, deep truth of the intimacy" between Chad and Marie has made Strether feel "lonely and cold" (2: 266). However, he does see the flaw in Marie—her genital sexuality. In his last visit to her, Marie seems older, "visibly less exempt from the touch of time," and "vulgarly troubled" (2: 286). He finds it "appalling" that such a woman can be a "creature so exploited" "by mysterious forces" (2: 284). He is particularly disturbed by the moral disparity between Marie and her lover: she is "the finest and subtlest creature," while Chad is "only Chad" (2: 284)—fundamentally the same crude and unimaginative young man who left Woollett. What on earth does she see in him? His lack of moral and intellectual distinction makes the answer obvious: being a beautiful, glossy young tiger, Chad's power of attraction is his sex potency. It is thus through the "hard," "grim," and "coercive" (2: 285) power of sex that Marie has been made vulnerable to age, exploitation, and vulgar troubles.[19]

Like prudish yet prurient Victorians in general, Strether apparently identifies the "lower passions" with the lower class: Marie is likened to a "maidservant crying for her young man" (2: 286). His urgent desire to punish Marie is further illustrated by his associating Marie with the French Revolution and with Madame Roland. Indeed, the description of his last meeting with Marie is permeated with imagery of revolutionary violence:

> Strether had all along been subject to sudden gusts of fancy in connection with such matters as these—odd starts of 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 broke out.... His hostess [Marie] was dressed for thunderous times, and it fell in with the kind of imagination we have just attributed to him that she should be in simplest coolest white, of a character so old-fashioned, if he were not mistaken, that Madame Roland must on the scaffold have worn something like that. (2: 274-275)

Strether invokes again the glorious French past, not of the grand empire but this time of the Revolution itself to serve as the dying chord of his doomed heroine. Madame Roland, whose first name was Jeanne-Marie, went to the guillotine because of her radical feminism. Her active involvement in the French politics had made her forget the "virtues" and duties of her sex and thus made her an example of the sex "out of control," a monster that needed the ultimate correction in order to

[19] In *The Ambassadors*, as elsewhere in James, notably in the phobic fantasies of *The Sacred Fount*, sexual love is not a source of life and pleasure, but is a hideous, devouring, and destructive process. It is ultimately a vampirish transaction in which one partner is subject to grim exploitation by the other. Marie is ruined, after all, because she has made Chad what he is—a gentle, refined-looking young man. She is a literary cousin of Mary Server and Chad is that of Gilbert Long, while Strether is the elder twin brother of the unnamed narrator in *The Sacred Fount*.

conform to the "male énergie" of the Republic (Brooks, *Body Works* 59). Quite in the same way, Marie's symbolic beheading is a consequence of her "costly disorder," that is, her transgression of the boundary that has been set up to regulate her sexuality. On the other hand, her beheading also reveals Strether's desire to be punished for seeing, in the primal scene, the forbidden, i.e., the female genitals. Like that of Medusa, the symbolic decapitation of Marie thus enacts his own symbolic castration.[20] "There is a tortured identity and contrast," as Bersani writes, "between masochistic and sadistic 'moments' in the act of seeing, between seeing as punishment submitted to and seeing as punishment inflicted" (135). From this interpretive point of view, the fantasized decapitation of Marie suggests both Strether's desire to punish her for her sexual orgies and his desire to punish himself for his own scopophilic orgies.

Another example of Strether's unconscious efforts to curb the surge of his own erotic fantasy by way of submitting the female body to the scaffold is found in an early scene from the novel which describes his evening engagement, for dinner and the theater, with Maria Gostrey. Seated opposite to Maria in the dining room of his London hotel, Strether, still on the threshold of his European adventures, notices only a few scattered details of his companion's generally unremarkable physical appearance: the "soft fragrance of the lady," her dress "cut down ... in respect to shoulders and bosom," and especially the "broad red velvet band with an antique jewel" which encircles her throat (1: 50). Strether mentally contrasts Mrs. Newsome, whose dress is never "cut down" and who looks, "with her ruff and other matters, like Queen Elizabeth," with Miss Gostrey, who "looked perhaps like Mary Stuart" (1: 50-51). Historically, Mary Stuart is connected to the scaffold. James himself was familiar with the political and sexual significance of Mary Stuart. In a review of Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Chasteland*, James says the subject of the work is "one of the numerous flirtations of Queen Mary of Scotland" (*Literary Criticism* 1: 1273), and Swinburne presents Mary "as a coquette on the heroic scale" (1276). For James, Mary Stuart is "romantic," "supremely lovely," and embodies, "if not all the virtues, at least all the charms, of her sex"; therefore, she is a poetic subject par excellence, "whether we accept her as a very conscientious or as a very profligate woman; as a martyr or simply as a criminal" (1274).

What Mary Stuart represents for James is what Maria Gostrey does for Strether. For Strether, Maria is not only a very "conscientious" guide to his journey to Europe but also, as discussed earlier, a very "profligate" woman, for she, with her "criminal" sexuality, strikes the key note of Strether's excursion as one leading to the unrestricted sexual expenditure. The comparison of her to a "Jesuit in petticoats," as well as to a "representative of the recruiting interests of the Catholic Church" (1: 41), adds a historical and religious dimension to the portrait of Maria and her dangerous sexuality and strikes home Strether's comparison of her to Mary Stuart, for it implies the traditional Protestant horror of the Catholic Church, the old temptress, and the Whore of Babylon.[21] All these have become for Strether a kind

[20] In his "Medusa's Head," Freud posits an equivalence of decapitation, castration, and erection. See Freud 18: 273-74.

[21] Queen Elizabeth sent Mary Stuart to the scaffold in 1587 in the name of political stability. For a brief

of "finely lurid intimation" (1: 40) of what he may find at the end of his journey. Therefore, the opening in her dress, the red band, and the analogy of her to Mary Stuart may suggest his fantasized decapitation of Maria, which is done, as he will do to Marie, in order to punish Maria's sexuality and his own surging erotic desire.

9. CONCLUSION

James writes of the eighteenth century and the French Revolution,

> A part of our kindness for eighteenth century rests on the fact that it paid so completely the price of both corruptions and enthusiasms.... The French Revolution rounds off the spectacle and renders it a picturesque service which has also something besides picturesqueness. It casts backward a sort of supernatural light, in the midst of which, at times, we seem to see a stage full of actors performing fantastic antics for our entertainment. But retroactively, too, it seems to exonerate the generations that preceded it, to make them irresponsible and give them the right to say that, since the penalty was to be exorbitant, a little pleasure more or less would not signify. (*Literary Criticism* 2: 653)

Paris, the Babylon of the modern time, is the theater of Strether's desire. It is a stage full of actors and actresses performing fantastic antics for his speculation and specularization; it opens up the intra- and inter-subjective space in which his consciousness explores rather hesitatingly and timidly, with the erotic providing the point of penetration and destination. However, the erotic is fictive and its fictiveness is what ensures the lucidity and sovereignty of Strether's consciousness, for it distinguishes itself from the merely genital sexuality which would incur too radical a loss and expenditure of the self. The woman, the erotic object, is essential to Strether's erotic speculation only in so far as she is de-sexualized and figures herself through the mediation of visual form or through his literary framing. It is then rather ironical that the sovereignty and the omnipotence of Strether's eroticizing consciousness are generated by his fear and repression of female sexuality. However, what has been repressed in his erotic speculation returns with a vengeance, in the form of the sexual liaison of Chad and Marie, and reveals the rupture, i.e., the genital sexuality, which both generates and destroys his erotic speculation.

The "revolution" performed by Strether under the influence of Paris certainly has something to do with the "*bêtise* of the imputably 'tempted' state," with the "vulgarity" of Paris, though James himself says it has nothing to do with them (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1313). Strether's revolution reaches its climax at the moment when the image of the French Revolution and of the guillotine are introduced in order to register his desire to punish Marie for her sexual orgies and punish himself for his scopophilic orgies. As it rounds off, James writes, the spectacular corruptions and enthusiasms of the eighteenth century, the French Revolution

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history of Mary Stuart, see the article on her which Swinburne contributed to the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

crosses out the credits and expenditure that Strether has had in his specular/speculative economy and denotes both the triumph and the defeat of his erotic imagination.

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