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In Pursuit of "Our Heroine's Biographer": A Study of Narrative Method in Henry James' The Portrait of a Lady & The Ambassadors

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IN PURSUIT OF "OUR HEROINE'S BIOGRAPHER:"

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I. Introductory statements

Henry James' novels **The Portrait of a Lady** (1881) and **The Ambassadors** (1903) are highly psychological; they address the complexities of the human mind, from motives and morals to flaws and potentials. The author is far more concerned with the way his characters' minds respond to events than with the events themselves. If we enjoy reading James it is largely because of the fascinating tensions he creates which give rise to these responses. Whether these tensions arise between characters or between an individual and his or her external circumstances, James sounds the depths of his characters' responses, demanding through the text a close scrutiny of our sense of human interaction and free will. James poignantly confronts the question of social freedom in both works, depicting Isabel Archer "in the process of forming herself"[1] in **The Portrait**, and Lambert Strether struggling to reconcile a past identity with the truths of self-discovery in **The Ambassadors**. These processes are incredibly human, complex, and inevitably ambiguous. Providing insight into the ambiguity and complexity of James' novels, Richard Poirier, in **The Comic Sense of Henry James**, writes;

> James' problem, briefly, is to avoid sacrificing the complexity or richness of character in the interest of moral edification or the representation of abstract qualities.[2]

The complexity and ambiguity of James' narrative are not mere stylistic ploys intended to heighten suspense by delaying lucidity; they are measures necessary to insure our appreciation of the problems his

characters confront as they undergo the processes depicted. In both works there exists a definite problem, constructed throughout and confronted in the end by both Isabel and Strether. For these problems to be perceived as true conflicts in the mind of the reader, James must give us the sense that the freedoms or individual volitions of these characters are in jeopardy. Indeed, both **The Portrait** and **The Ambassadors** live or die according to the extent to which James renders significant the conflict between free will and social obligation. In order for us to appreciate this tension we must be made to feel that there is something of the character's "self" at stake.

For James, to enhance our sense of his characters' freedom and potential, ambiguity and complexity of character are desirable because they prevent hasty evaluation, or moral pigeon-holing on the part of the reader. James needs to subdue our judgment in order to divulge, enhance, and magnify complexity in the interest of character freedom. For as James himself would be the first to assert, premature judgment leads to a narrowness of vision and circumscribes the scope of our understanding of character. A prime illustration of James enforcing this in **The Portrait** is his treatment of Henrietta Stackpole's character. Throughout much of the novel Henrietta is painted with an ironic enough brush to allow us to all but write her off as a significant participant in Isabel's experience. Yet, ultimately, James reaffirms Henrietta Stackpole as a character with redeemable qualities enough to play a role in Isabel's life. The same seems true of other similarly treated characters like Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton in **The Portrait** and Waymarsh in **The Ambassadors.** To subdue judgment and thereby retain complexity and ambiguity of character insures

James of the perceived character freedom that is at the heart of the chronicled conflicts.

His task, then, is to invest thought and statement with a meaning that will convey to the reader the complexity of the situation depicted. James' response to this task is to choose those narrative methods which privilege the reader to intimate contact with the operation of his characters' minds. Rather than narrate from a first-person stance, these novels retain the distance of a third-person narrative while evoking some of the flavor of first-person accounts. Witness the following passage from **The Portrait**:

> If for Isabel Madame Merle had a fault, it was that she was not natural; by which the girl meant that her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much smoothed. She had become too flexible, too supple; she was too finished, too civilized.[3]

Although the presence of the third-person narrator is temporarily clouded by its acute focus on Isabel's thoughts, it cannot vanish altogether.

Can we call this narrator "omniscient?" Indeed, it is all-knowing in the sense that it absorbs and relates not only characters' actions and dialogue, but their deepest thoughts and feelings; Wayne Booth in **The Rhetoric of Fiction** has called this narrative invasion "omniscience with teeth in it."[4] But the traditionally omniscient narrator functions in a way that these narrators in James fail to: It removes itself from the subjective realities in which its characters operate to a narrative of its own, shaping these subjective realities into a legitimated, objective

reality for the reader to absorb. This kind of evaluation is infrequent in these novels, as though James were trying to minimize the distance between reader and character while retaining those privileges inherent in a narration external to the characters themselves. I will take up the question of omniscience again in my discussion of narration in **The Portrait**, but it is the tendency, to varying extents, in both works toward non-omniscience that prompts this discussion. Therefore, I will focus on James' narrative methods within the broader context of the disembodied narrator.

This largely disembodied narratorial presence may not always be thought of as a narrator, but as a narrative consciousness, through which James brings the reader as near as possible to the origin of his characters' sentiments, without relinquishing a third-person perspective. This narrative consciousness does not present to the reader an objective reality; rather, insofar as one presents itself it arises from our exposure to and interpretation of the subjective realities of James' characters. The distinction between point of view and narrative consciousness may be a useful one to make here, for while these terms can be used interchangeably to an extent, narrative consciousness has connotations beyond what is signified by point of view. I use the term narrative consciousness to mean the working knowledge and awareness of the narrative presence- whether that be the narrator's persona or a character- amassed up to a particular point in the discourse. While point of view denotes the "position" of the narrative in relation to the characters, narrative consciousness extends into the realm of epistemology.

Those characters' minds in whom the narrative consciousness is embedded may be seen as "centers" of that consciousness. Although both texts employ the center of consciousness as a prevalent mode of narration (and there are more similarities than differences in the way the two stories are told), it is the distinction between the methods of narration in these works that I will address here. By describing the nature of the narrative in **The Portrait** I hope to elucidate the problematic aspects of its narrative methods, the ways in which they impede the response they seem intended to engender in the reader. Then I take up the narration of **The Ambassadors** to demonstrate the ways in which it eludes or ameliorates many of these difficulties. My analysis suggests that the narration of **The Portrait** may be problematic enough to hinder the development of our sense that James is presenting us with a real conflict in the way the narration of **The Ambassadors** does.

II. Narrative methods in **The Portrait of A Lady**

Like many of James' works, **The Portrait** is a chronicle of a sensibility transformed. In this case he presents us with a young, American ingenue, headstrong and sharp-witted, and as prepared as any of her kind for the rigors of European society, but inherently vulnerable nonetheless. Isabel undergoes, in **The Portrait**, what many feel to be the most forceful mental transformation in fiction. Upon her arrival in Europe she either possesses or is provided with all the social and pecuniary "tools" necessary to gain the independence she desires. In her pursuit and apparent discovery of this

independence, however, Isabel is hindered and ultimately doomed to unhappiness by her inexperience, and in particular her inability to be a lucid judge of character. It is the curtailment of the hopeful freedom with which James imbues Isabel's character that invigorates the tragedy of **The Portrait.**

The narrative methods James employs in **The Portrait** reflect his concern for fostering his reader's involvement in Isabel's experience. Peter Buitenhuis comments on the pains James takes to entice the reader:

> The easy way out of the problem of showing her weakness and strength lay in presenting her with the vantage point of the other characters. James decided against this method. "'Place the centre of the subject in the young woman's consciousness,' I said to myself, 'and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you would wish.'"[5]

Both Buitenhuis and James suggest that a story narrated in a mode most befitting the author's task easily becomes facile. Whether or not this is the case, I am not sure either of their assertions ring true in light of the narration of **The Portrait**, whose "subject," according to James, is "a certain young woman affronting her destiny."[6] Many different narrative modes are used in the book, and while some prevail over others, James cannot be said to have wholly "decided against this method" of reflecting Isabel through other characters' perspectives.

We learn a good deal about Isabel's fallibility, for instance, in the following passage:

> [Ralph] had given a great deal of consideration to Isabel's intimacy with Madame Merle- having long since made up his mind that he could not, without opposition, keep his cousin to himself...He believed it would take care of itself; it would not last forever. Neither of these two superior persons knew the other as well as she supposed, and when each of them had made certain discoveries, there would be, if not a rupture, at least a relaxation.[7]

The narrative consciousness is centered on Ralph primarily to divulge his affection for Isabel; but it also intimates the blindness Ralph finds in the affinity these two women share, and colors our perception of Isabel's view of this relationship. For if we trust Ralph's perception, as I think the narrator asks us to do, we must heed his intimation of Isabel's shortsightedness.

James too may miss the mark in representing the nature of his narration when he conceives of it as fixed in Isabel's point of view. This practice does indeed pervade much of the book, but the narrative consciousness cannot be said to "belong" exclusively to Isabel any more than it "belongs" to several other characters. The most recently quoted passage speaks to this point, as it provides the narrative consciousness with as thorough a release from Isabel's consciousness as is found in the novel. Thus, the narrative consciousness can take on the appearance of the consciousness of any one character, but when speaking independent of these must be viewed as possessing the collective knowledge of all characters. It is nonetheless selective in its allegiance to and legitimation of any one character's subjective reality.

Moreover, the strategies that James uses to narrate **The Portrait** cannot be tagged with one comprehensive term; they are various and often blend together. In addition to conventional

narrative omniscience, which makes significant appearances in **The Portrait**, we also find what may be called "psycho-narration" and "narrated monologue."[8] These terms, taken from Dorrit Cohn's **Transparent Minds**, may not be entirely adequate for describing all that James' narration does in the novel, but, allowing for some hybridization, they closely approximate the variety of approaches taken. First, however, I will take up the most omniscient of James' narrative methods, the embodied third-person narrator.

This method, though I have called it omniscience, is at once more and less than that term implies. It is somewhat self-conscious and occasionally self-referential, and though it seems anomalous, the first-person appears a handful of times. Thus, we have the sense that there exists a persona, employed by James to hover over and convey to us the action and dialogue. It is especially prominent in the early, characterizational stages of the novel, as James attempts to engender certain perceptions of characters through an obviously external voice (e.g., "Mrs Touchett was certainly a person of many oddities.").[9]

This voice, however, is limited in a way that truly omniscient narratives are not. It removes itself, as I've said, from the task of amassing and evaluating facts gathered from one scene to the next, and refrains from independently recognizing the ironies and discrepancies that abound in the text. An illustration of this narrative non-omniscience is the manner by which we come to know of Isabel's engagement to Gilbert Osmond. When we leave her at the end of Chapter 30, she is unwed, and though an imminent union seems plausible, its realization has been only lightly intimated. Chapter 31 rejoins Isabel one year later, and while she is now engaged to marry

Osmond, the narrator chooses to gloss over this topic in favor of cataloguing the travel she has done in our absence. Not until four pages into Chapter 32 does the narrator grant us this ordinarily unmitigated information, and when it is disclosed James treats the fact as though it were too easily acquired. Veiling it behind considerable superfluous dialogue, he writes:

> Mr Goodwood fixed his eyes for a moment on the floor; then at last, raising them- "Does she know Mr Osmond?" he asked. "A little. And she doesn't like him. But of course I don't marry to please Henrietta," Isabel added.[10]

This choice in narrative (non) revelation is obviously intentional, and by creating a withholding narrator James may lead us to think these facts all the more precious.

The narrative consciousness may be thought of not only as non-omniscient insofar as it fails to act as an all-inclusive conduit through which we receive character and event; it can also be thought of as decidedly "anti"-omniscient. If we assume that the narrative consciousness is privy to all character thought, but selective in its structuring and presentation, we find that it divorces itself from what we can be certain it "knows." In the following passage, James displays a counter-omniscient narrative thrust in a more overblown fashion than usual:

> Though I [narrator] have tried to speak with extreme discretion, the reader may have gathered a suspicion that Osmond was not untainted by selfishness... If Osmond was more selfish than most of his fellows, the fact will still establish itself. Lest it should fail to do so I must decline to commit myself to an accusation so

> gross; the more especially as some of the items of our story would seem to point the other way.[11]

James calls attention to the notion that the narrator's evaluations operate in an entirely separate cognitive sphere from the one which occupies us in the story. He implies a distance between the narrator and the events described. Yet, it is apparent, both in the very appearance of such an anomalous narratorial interjection and in the suggestive reasoning it employs, that this passage is intended to influence our perception of Osmond for the worse. Since we already harbor the suspicion that Osmond may be "tainted" by his selfishness, it takes nothing more than this faltering confirmation of our feeling to render this attempt to counter omniscience transparent. The effect this has on the reader is paradoxical; for although counter-omniscience conceals information that might be made explicit by a fully omniscient narrator, thus delaying our comprehension, it calls attention to the narrator's potential knowledge.

In terms of proximity to conventional omniscience, the narrative method of **The Portrait** I now take up might be seen as following narrative (non) omniscience at a distance. "The more conspicuous and idiosyncratic the narrator," writes Cohn,"the less apt he is to reveal the depth of his characters' psyches [i.e., the scope and complexity of his characters' perceptions] or, for that matter, to create psyches that have depth to reveal."[12] Though Cohn may mistake the narrator for the author in his location of the creative office, the passage speaks to a fundamental aim of the narration of **The Portrait**- "to reveal the depth of [James'] characters' psyches." In Cohn's mind, then, it would

behove him to disguise his narrator, as he does in writing psycho-narration.

Psycho-narration, according to Cohn, is "the narrator's discourse **about** a character's consciousness"[13](my emphasis). Through this method the narrative consciousness, embedded in a character's thoughts, comes as close as possible to being identified with character consciousness without slipping into first-person narration. In **The Portrait**, James relies on this method of narration to relate to the reader the great majority of the novel's events, thereby infusing the "story" with characters' ruminations and obfuscating the intrusive element of the embodied narrator's presence. Widely cited in this regard is Chapter 42, an extended foray into Isabel's consciousness as she reflects on her marriage:

> [Isabel's] soul was haunted with terrors which crowded to the foreground of thought as quickly as a place was made for them. What had suddenly set them into livelier motion she hardly knew, unless it were the strange impression she had received in the afternoon of her husband and Madame Merle being in more direct communication than she suspected.[14]

Although the narrator achieves an intimacy with Isabel by relinquishing narrative objectivity, he nonetheless couches her discourse in terms that identify her as the subject of a discourse of his own. This passage renders Isabel's mind and thoughts to the reader as having almost tangible spatial otherness through its use of "crowded," "place," and "motion." Despite this construction of figural separateness, it is almost as though we hear Isabel's thoughts just as she thinks them. It is not, after all, the narrator who has conceived of a "more

direct communication" between Osmond and Madame Merle, though he may have given voice to this conception. Psycho-narration in **The Portrait** asks us to take the narrator's representation of Isabel's consciousness as unmitigated. Such a method serves James' ultimate purpose of enhancing our sense of the conflict in the situation depicted. For the more directly Isabel's perception informs our conception of events, the greater our sympathy for her; and the more completely unified are our perceptions, the less apt we are to prematurely paint Isabel into a particular corner of James' scheme of character potential. James needs to breathe life into the alternatives we see for Isabel in order to create conflict.

It must be added that while James' psycho-narration is mimetic in its representation of Isabel's thoughts, it is not clear that we are to take the very words on the page to be those conceived by Isabel and transposed by this "biographer." In fact, it seems absurd to imagine that Isabel, as well as the rest of the characters to whom we have cognitive access, formulate their thoughts in the same idiom as the narrative voice. There is, however, no noticeable change in idiom in **The Portrait** as the narrative shifts among the different characters' consciousnesses and its own voice. When we read, "A certain instinct, not imperious, but persuasive, told her to resist- it murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own,"[15] it is not clear that Isabel has *not* thought to herself these exact words; but it is fallacious to assume either that she has made cogent sense of these thoughts or that, if she has, they share the common idiom of the narrator and other characters. James' psycho-narration can therefore be seen as a mimesis of "concept," if not of exact inner discourse. This

continuity of idiom in **The Portrait** facilitates James' design to make smooth transitions between character thought and narrative discourse, thus minimizing the distance between the narrator and the characters as well as enhancing our sense that we are informed by the characters themselves.

If we assume that, by James' choice, the characters have in a sense "sacrificed" their own idiom(s) to that of the narrator, the voice with which the narrator imparts character consciousness discloses something of his view toward them. The narrative "mood"[16] has tremendous potential to manipulate our sympathies, and hinges on the extent to which the narrative voice is either in opposition to or aligned with the "voice," in either spoken or unspoken form, of the characters. In the case of psycho-narration in **The Portrait**, the fact that James chooses to unify his characters' idiom with that of the narrator speaks to his over-arching effort to efface, when he finds it desirable, the intrusive, personified narrator. Without a differentiation of idiom it is difficult to perceive any discrepancy between character thought and narrative evaluation, if such evaluation exists at all. Our response becomes more closely coordinated with that of Isabel; we are immersed more completely into her cognitive struggles and experience more forcefully the tensions she confronts.

That James often so closely allies not only the voice, but also the mood of the narrative consciousness with his characters' sentiments sometimes renders Cohn's crisp demarcations of narrative method inadequate in my attempt to articulate James' approaches. The center of narrative consciousness in **The Portrait** cannot always be determined. It is ambiguous, even given the context of the following

passage, whether we are witnessing straight, third-person narration or if the substance of thought has its origins in Isabel's mind:

> Isabel moreover was not prone to take for granted that she herself lived in the mind of others- she had not the fatuity to to believe that she left indelible traces. She was capable of being wounded by the discovery that she had been forgotten; and yet, of all liberties, the one she herself found sweetest was the liberty to forget.[17]

While we are led, by the invocation of Isabel's mentality, to believe that she must have considered each of these qualities of hers at some time, it is not certain that the narrator is here, as in other places, peering over her shoulder at external events. This stems largely from the trans-temporal nature of the qualities described. Isabel was not "feeling removed from her past today;" rather, the quoted discourse is intended to represent a truth about Isabel that is not anchored in particular circumstance, but durative. It becomes difficult to determine, then, the degree to which the narrative lucidly reflects Isabel's consciousness or is merely informed by it. As I discuss hereafter, such conflation can become problematic in **The Portrait**, but its overall implication for the reader is to cultivate our sympathy for Isabel by emphasizing her participation in the explication of her story.

James may disclose, conceal, or render ambiguous many events and sentiments in **The Portrait** by narrating character dialogue. In fact, it is through dialogue that we come to know much of what we know about each character. In a sense, quoted dialogue is the ideal mode of narration for an author like James who is so sensitive to the

intrusiveness of the narrative voice. Were he to desire a wholly disembodied narrative consciousness, a discourse of exclusively quoted dialogue would serve this purpose. In **The Portrait**, however, James often conflates character dialogue with what I have described as psycho-narration. By failing to demarcate by quotation select passages of alleged inter-character discourse, the narrative achieves a tenuous balance between quoted dialogue and reflective episodes within characters' consciousnesses. The following passage depicts an interaction between Isabel and Osmond which is crystallized in this narrative moment. Referring to the liaison between Henrietta Stackpole and Mr Bantling;

> Osmond thought their alliance a kind of monstrosity; he couldn't imagine what they had in common. For him, Mr Bantling's fellow tourist was simply the most vulgar of women, and he also pronounced her the most abandoned Against this latter clause of the verdict, Isabel protested with an ardour which made him wonder afresh at the oddity of some of his wife's tastes.[18]

Note the ease with which the narrative consciousness fuses the discourse of the purportedly verbalized dialogue with the discourse of character consciousness. We achieve a sort of intimacy with Osmond here which could not be wrought from an omniscient quotation of dialogue. Unlike quoted conversation, the passage above is not temporally rooted and gives us the illusion that, more so than a passage of dialogue, these thoughts are reiterated for *our* benefit, not merely as mimesis of a particular moment in time.

This kind of "blurring" of the boundaries that separate the more overt from the more covert forms of narratorial intrusion into the text is precisely the aesthetic James strives for in **The Portrait**. Since, as Booth says, "the author can to some extent choose his disguises, [but] he can never choose to disappear,"[19] it may be appropriate to think of methods by which his imprint is effaced as a more covert, or disguised, form of intrusion. This is the case as the narrative drifts from psycho-narration to narrated monologue. Narrated monologue acts in **The Portrait** to create the same sense of immersion within character consciousness as psycho-narration, but heightens it by relinquishing the third-person referent. Such a release is exhibited as we move from the first to the second sentence of the following passage:

> He thought Miss Archer sometimes too eager, too pronounced. It was a pity she had that fault; because if she had not had it she would really have had none.[20]

"He thought" is the necessary precursor to establishing the second sentence as a continuation of Osmond's reflections. For, though it lacks any referent itself, this portion of the narrative assumes our recognition of its context, without which we would attribute the statement to the narrator.

Thus, the center of narrative consciousness hovers somewhere between Osmond and the narrator in narrated monologue, refusing to make explicit the nonetheless apparent origin of the statement presented. The narrator may, therefore, iterate judgments with which

he may or may not concur, simultaneously effacing his presence while giving subjective judgments a more objective texture than can be achieved through psycho-narration. The office of evaluation and judgment in the novel thereby becomes located not in the narrator, but largely in the characters themselves. And our continual exposure to their various conceptions of the ethical and social struggle at hand preserves the ambiguity of the narrative. When the narrator inserts his persona, or verbalizes his external observation, the complexity of Isabel's situation is inevitably shaped into a more easily digestible form; indeed, this is an indispensable aspect of the narration of **The Portrait**, without which we would have even more difficulty understanding the forces at work in Isabel's mind. However, James depends on psycho-narration and narrated monologue to subdue our evaluative tendency as readers and invigorate our sense of conflict.

III. Problematic implications of the narrative methods of **The Portrait**

I have tried to demonstrate, through illustration and analysis, the multifarious and experimental nature of James' approach to narration. And while I hope to have elucidated the paradoxical qualities of a narrative that both obfuscates and reinscribes narrative omniscience, it does not necessarily follow that the text itself suffers. To the contrary, James has created through these approaches a chronicle of the development of sensibility that sounds unprecedented depths in terms of both character consciousness and sensitivity to the reader's perception. As I have suggested earlier, however, James'

vigorous manipulation of narrative methods spins off several difficulties; and by difficulties I am referring not to the epistemological struggle we are engaged in while reading **The Portrait**, but the potential hazards of these narrative choices.

The narrative methods I have explicated lend themselves to an assumption regarding James' intended positioning of the reader vis a vis the characters. While it is true that the authorial voice of the narrator is indispensable to the telling of this story, it is not far-fetched to claim that James is interested in diminishing the distance created by the narrator's presence between the reader and the characters. It seems, further, that the desired effect of such a method is to foster the reader's sense of intimacy with the characters, to understand in a more complete way what it means to be Isabel Archer in such a situation. If we realize Isabel's desires, her pride, her weaknesses and the investment she has made in marrying Osmond, we feel the tensions she confronts and recognize the gains and sacrifices involved in the decisions she makes. The narrative methods I have described enhance our immersion in and sympathy for Isabel's interpretation of reality and forbid us to compartmentalize her character or definitively anticipate her actions. James' depiction of her is a hopeful one, and its lack of skepticism propagates our perception of Isabel's freedom. Yet within the ambitious narrative methods of **The Portrait** arise inconsistencies, confounding and irreconcilable narrative cross-currents which problematize James' intention to forcefully present the conflicts Isabel confronts.

Several of these difficulties are conceived through the variations James makes in the degree to which the narrator's omniscience is

acknowledged or asserted. These changes, or modulations in treatment, are not in themselves inconsistencies, but narrative ploys; rather, the subtle inconsistencies I address spring from the reader's awareness of the intended effect of these ploys. Another problem, that of allowing the reader so exhaustive an insight into Isabel that we are able to delegitimate elements of her characterization, arises from the epistemological privilege the reader enjoys in a shifting center of consciousness narrative. Finally, with such vigorous manipulation of the narrative center of consciousness, James may, on occasion, risk beclouding the origin of the discourse to such an degree that we fail to identify our informant- a task crucial to our understanding of this and other similarly constructed Jamesian texts.

The first of the problems I will examine is illuminated by a passage cited above in which the narrator attempts, after an extended venture into Osmond's consciousness, to muddy his own judgment which he fears may be conspicuously clear. "Though I have tried to speak with extreme discretion," he tells us, "the reader may have gathered a suspicion that Osmond was not untainted by his selfishness." This and the ensuing statements are made as pronouncements of sensitivity to his privileged position and, whether ironic or no, seem intended to release the narrator from the expectations we, as readers of his testimony, may have of him to exercise this privilege. Yet, I would suggest that this and other explicit attempts on James' part to render the inherently evaluative nature of the narration less forceful are futile and, especially in cases like this, merely call attention to themselves as troubling aberrations. That James must resort to such a tactic to complicate our eventual

indictment of Osmond's character reflects what Richard Poirier has called, "James' anxiety lest the characters he values most be judged by the reader too coarsely, too harshly, or too epithetically."[21] If to "value" a character is to consider him or her vital to the construction of conflict, Osmond is indispensable to James. He must remain free from the categorizing manacles of the critical reader long enough to escape the label of the out-and-out villain. Such an interpretation would render flaccid the conflict Isabel ultimately recognizes, as the viability of her alternative to return to him would be substantially diminished. By effacing, and yet reinscribing narrative omniscience, James reveals an attempt to "tell," in a compensatory manner, that which he fears he may not have "shown."

James is immensely aware of his narrator's place in the novel with respect to both his reader and his characters. And despite the care he takes to maneuver the narrative consciousness in a manner which enhances our involvement in the characters' minds, inconsistencies and contradictions spring up in a narrator that is intended to remain in the shadows of our perception at one point and in the foreground at another. In a sense, an omniscient narration belies the invisibility of the narrator on which James often relies for effect in **The Portrait**, just as this invisibility belies established omniscience. And to legitimate both methods in isolation of one another is inherently problematic.

When the narrator tells us, for instance, that Isabel's "errors and delusions were frequently such as a biographer interested in preserving the dignity of his heroine must shrink from specifying,"[22] we momentarily wonder whether *this* "biographer" *is* intent on such

a goal. For if he is, why even mention Isabel's shortcomings? We must soon recognize, though, that this statement may be ironic, intended to emphasize Isabel's dignity in spite of her trivial foibles which the narrator (read James in this case) has chosen to obscure. This passage illustrates what Poirier calls James' "anxious desire to convince the reader that for all the oddities he may see in Isabel, he is to love her the more and to engage less in any attempt to sum her up."[23] The irony springs from the absurdity of diverting our perception so emphatically that the statement reveals that which it "would" (apparently) becloud. Regardless of the possibly ironic intent of such a statement, however, the narrator undermines what James has suggested, through the various narrative methods I have described, is his intention: to paint a "portrait of a lady" which achieves its veracity, its realism, through an intimate assimilation of character sensibility rather than omniscient narrative observation. As soon as it is intimated (as it is in this passage) that the narrator has an "interest" in the outcome of the story, we necessarily question his reliability. And this, I think is one issue from which **The Portrait**, on the whole, steers quite clear. The narrative methods James uses inhibit us from formulating prematurely concrete moral interpretations of any particular character, as the narrator himself puts on this anti-evaluative facade. But it is as though such statements as the one above render artificial the narrator's general effort to refrain from manipulating our perceptions toward anything other than what he can be assumed to genuinely "know." If it is the case, as I think it is, that the narrator is employed much more to render an objective reality via exposure to various subjective realities

than to shape our perceptions himself, it is stifling for the reader to encounter an inherent "interest," whether feigned or no, in this narrator. It violates what Poirier and James himself have called the historical tone of the novel,[24] lending an artificiality to James' concern for our recognition of Isabel's complexity.

A similar problem springs from what I would call "qualified" psycho-narrative, or psycho-narration which inexplicably hesitates to commit itself to representing character consciousness. Having established its capacity to occupy characters' minds, the narrative consciousness of **The Portrait** is at times reluctant to exercise this capacity, though it acknowledges the opportunity to do so:

> [Isabel's] flexible figure turned itself this way and that, in sympathy with the alertness with which she *evidently* caught impressions. Her impressions were numerous, and they were all reflected in a clear, still smile.[25](my emphasis)

It has not been specified that we are peering through the lens of any particular character's consciousness. Yet, the narrator tiptoes around the fact of his omniscience by inserting the qualifier, "evidently." This hesitancy alone may be no more than a narrative idiosyncrasy, reflecting the introductory nature of this exposure to Isabel. But the ensuing mention of the quantity of these impressions belies an omniscient capacity which the previous statement would suppress. The effect of such a vicissitude is to prompt confusion in the reader regarding the role of a narrator who entertains these contradictory impulses.

It may seem plausible to engage in such paradoxical descriptive narration early in the development of Isabel's character, since the narrator has not yet established itself as an intermittent resident of Isabel's consciousness. However, much later in the novel, similar inconsistencies arise. When Lord Warburton, Isabel's resilient suitor, offers rhetorically, "Do you know I am very much afraid of it- that mind of yours?" the narrator thrusts forth its persona to claim,

> Our heroine's biographer can scarcely tell why, but the question made her start and brought a conscious blush to her cheek. She returned his look a moment, and then, with a note in her voice that might almost have appealed to his compassion- "So am I, my lord!" she exclaimed.[26]

It is puzzling that "our heroine's biographer," who ordinarily tells so much about Isabel- including, at times, thoughts she herself doesn't even recognize- can disengage himself so readily from this capacity. It is one thing for James to seek an effect by disengaging this mode of narration, but quite another to falsely claim disempowerment.

Tied to the problem of "qualified" psycho-narration in **The Portrait** is an even more curious and conspicuous inconsistency: Having established certain characters' minds as accessible through psycho-narration, the narrator explicitly denies this capacity, implying the disparity between his methods of treatment and the censorship this entails. When Isabel inherits her fortune from Mr Touchett, the narrator balks at the situation, claiming, "Isabel thought of it very often and looked at it in a dozen different lights; but we shall not at present attempt to enter into her meditations or to explain why it was

that some of them were of a rather pessimistic cast."[27] No evidence presents itself which would suggest the validity of the narrator's inhibitions. James denies the reader that privilege which we otherwise enjoy, yet nothing accounts for this restriction. But more than merely frustrate the reader's inquisitive tendency, this overt circumscription of the center of consciousness contradicts the narrative foundations on which the book is based. The narrator who would forbid our premature evaluation of Isabel, but construct such conspicuous artifices for this office may become the object of our skepticism. And yet if we do fail to abide by his suggestion, Isabel's character may become less compelling for the very reasons the narrator tries to prevent.

We might be led to believe that in scenes involving Isabel we would not be privy to anyone's thoughts but her own. Such selectivity might make sense in light of the primary aim of the narrative: to convey Isabel's evolving sensibility. And although there are many instances to the contrary, this type of restriction of point of view does, in fact, seem to prevail on numerous occasions:

> Whether on his side Mr Goodwood felt himself older than on the first occasion of our meeting him is a point which we shall perhaps presently ascertain; let me say meanwhile that to Isabel's critical glance he showed nothing of the injury of time.[28]

James makes evident his effort to confine the shifting center of consciousness narration to Isabel at this point, viewing Caspar Goodwood more as an object of Isabel's perception than the subject of his own study. Insofar as we will learn anything about Goodwood's

thoughts in this scene, we will "presently ascertain" it, implying that we, as Isabel, will need to hear him speak to know what is (purportedly) on his mind. There will be no narrative invasion of Goodwood's consciousness as he interacts with Isabel, for our concern is rather strictly with her reaction to him.

This "principle" of restricting the shifts of narrative consciousness in scenes involving Isabel is, however, betrayed on occasion. In the gripping Chapter 52, in which Isabel confronts Madame Merle, armed for the first time with the knowledge of the latter's deceit, we experience what may be the first unabashed plunge into Madame Merle's psyche in the novel. It may be an indulgence on James' part to betray the aforementioned "principle" of restriction, but the narrator does tell us;

> Madame Merle had guessed in the space of an instant that everything was at an end between them, and in the space of another instant she had guessed the reason why. The person who stood there was... a person who knew her secret. This discovery was tremendous.[29]

We have not only abandoned Isabel's consciousness, we have become intimately immersed in the consciousness of her counterpart in the scene. In this light it does seem incongruous that James might be curtailing the reader's epistemological privilege (i.e., restricting the shifting center of consciousness) for the sake of developing Isabel's sensibility more fully. Nevertheless, a relapse of this practice occurs with regard to these same characters on the very next page:

> Isabel's only revenge was to be silent still- to leave Madame Merle in this unprecedented situation. She left her there for a period which *must have* seemed long to this lady, who at last seated herself with a movement which was in itself a confession of helplessness.(my emphasis)

It appears that James would have the best of two mutually exclusive worlds in his effort to enhance the force with which these thoughts strike us: He denies and yet reinscribes the mobility of the narrative consciousness at points so proximate in this discourse that he may forfeit the stability of his approach. Even in passages in which the center of consciousness shifts frequently and abruptly we retain the sense of continuity or fluidity of treatment; but the inconsistency found in the passages above, deliberate though it may be, is more than a mere narrative ambiguity. It renders transparent James' narrative strategy of obfuscating the narrator by calling our attention to his presence in the very act of effacement.

Because our developing sense of the story is largely dependent on Isabel's interpretations, the reader's sensibility is paired with hers in the author's mind. If he is to instill in us, through Isabel, an "intensity of impression,"[30] he must first conjure it in Isabel herself. Isabel, however, is deprived of the reader's privilege to reflect on the manner in which this impression, or sense of significance of event, is engendered. As a fictional character she obviously cannot step outside the very discourse of which she is the subject; the reader, on the other hand, can ask the question, "How did James get us thinking this way?"

How, I would ask for instance, does James foster in the reader a suspicion of Madame Merle? The answer is closely related to the question of how and why Isabel reacts to her, since, as I have

suggested, Isabel is the most prominent "source" of James' narrative. I could extract from the text specific passages which would provide an adequate response to this question, but I suggest, rather, that James does *not* hold himself accountable to the reader for the reactions he elicits through Isabel with regard to Madame Merle. He relies on contrivance and the credulity of a reader who is anxious have inferences gratified, rather than on a basis in actual narrated event, to engender and crystallize our suspicion of Madame Merle. Our detachment from the "reality" of the story allows us to hypothesize and infer much more readily than Isabel. She is unwilling to heed as readily as we, for example, Ralph's reservations regarding Madame Merle and Osmond. Thus, while we stray into regions of mental possibility, reflecting on James' various "next moves," Isabel is, naturally, confined to her own consciousness. When we encounter the following passage, then, we are somehow prepared for it in a way that we must see Isabel is not, and this is the note of contrivance I suggest:

> Madame Merle had ceased to minister to Isabel's happiness, who found herself wondering whether the most discreet of women might not also be the most dangerous.[31]

Now, as far as we know, Isabel has not "progressed" in her evaluation of Madame Merle's character to the point we may have. She is naive and unassuming by nature, the narrator suggests. Her reaction to the striking juxtaposition of Osmond and Madame Merle in Chapter 40 is that of a "new," but "not unprecedented" impression of these two, while the narrator divulges that "what [Isabel] had not seen, or at least

had not noticed- was that their dialogue had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence."[32] A statement like this provides the ground for my assertion that while we see "through" Isabel (i.e., as a conduit), we also see "around" her (i.e., outside her).

Thus, in order to truly believe what James tells us Isabel understands, we must extract ourselves somewhat from the privileged position of reader and try to understand from her position. It is in this light that passages like the aforementioned one regarding Isabel's dawning suspicion of Madame Merle become anomalous. While we may accept this assertion, it is unclear why Isabel should have reached this critical stance at this point. James seems to be somewhat aware of this fact, as he describes Isabel as having "found herself thinking" these thoughts rather than having arrived at them over time. James recognizes that we ought, at this point, to perceive Madame Merle in a certain light; and although it seems legitimate for Isabel to come to these conclusions, it is contrivance rather than traced psychological development or influential occurrence by which Isabel arrives at her judgment. By granting the reader such a privileged position in the narrative with regard to both the characters and the narrator, James may leave himself vulnerable to this sort of deconstruction of character epistemology.[33]

In a novel like **The Portrait** in which authorial and figural modes of narration are frequently blended it is essential that we be able to distinguish between the discourse of the narrator and that of character consciousness. While James' subtle techniques for merging these two into a cogent text do not call attention to it, this distinction is nonetheless indispensable to the reader, who must recognize the origin

of particular perceptions. Indeed, our ultimate evaluations and realization of conflict are informed by our capacity to recognize the source and implications of a (re)presented discourse. When the boundary between authorial and figural narration becomes sufficiently blurred, we lose sight of this origin, albeit temporarily. This hyper-obliquity is infrequent in **The Portrait**, as James is painstakingly careful to delineate the course the narrative follows from narrative consciousness to character consciousness and back. Yet, as the following passage illustrates, when it does occur it is not merely distracting (i.e., it is not just a matter of re-reading to discover the locus of thought), it detracts from our comprehension of James' narrative pattern. The passage in question is too long to be quoted here in its entirety, but note the absence of any indication of a transition in "voice" heard in these and the subsequently quoted lines. They begin with Isabel thinking;

> Madame Merle knew so little what she [Isabel herself] was thinking of! Moreover, she herself was so unable to explain. Jealous of her- jealous of her with Gilbert? The idea just then suggested no near reality. She almost wished that jealousy had been possible; it would be a kind of refreshment.[34]

Two qualities of this speech indicate its origin in Isabel's mind; first, the narrator does not call Osmond "Gilbert;" and second, our placement in time according to "just then" is fixed in the fictional present. I would suggest that in the several lines that follow, however, the narrative shifts to the consciousness of the authorial narrator:

> Madame Merle, however, was wise; it would seem that she knew Isabel better than she knew herself. This

> young woman had always been fertile in resolutions- many of them of an elevated character; but at no period had they flourished (in the privacy of her heart) more richly than today...The poor girl had always had a great desire to do her best, and she had not as yet been seriously discouraged. She wished, therefore to hold fast to justice- not to pay herself by petty revenges...It was impossible to pretend that she had not acted with her eyes open...When a woman made such a mistake, there was only one way to repair it- to accept it...In this vow of reticence there was a certain nobleness which kept Isabel going.

The point at which the center of consciousness shifts in this passage is unclear. When authorial third-person narration (suggested by such hallmarks of narrative distance as "this young woman," and "the poor girl"), becomes conflated with the narrated monologue (or, what is deemed Isabel's conscious "vow"*ex post facto*), the narrative ceases, in effect, to fulfill its office of lucidly reflecting Isabel's sensibility and motives, for they are indistinguishable from what may be extrapolation.

My aim in citing these problematic implications of the narration of **The Portrait** is not to elucidate the challenging nature of the text; nor is it to reveal that James in some way "failed" at what he attempted, for this is both misguided and presumptuous. Rather, I hope to have called attention to the sticky issues James raises when he intertwines the multifaceted shifting center of consciousness narration with a somewhat inconspicuous, but persistent authorial narrative voice.

IV. Narrative methods in The Ambassadors

With the near disappearance of the latter in **The Ambassadors**, James either alleviates or eludes many of these difficulties by telling a similar "type" of story in a slightly, but significantly different mode of narration. The central character with whom the sensibility of the narrative is oriented in **The Ambassadors**, Lambert Strether, resembles Isabel Archer of **The Portrait** in many ways: They share the mixed blessing in James of being Americans in Europe, confronted by salient differences in protocol, befuddled by an overwhelming urbanity, and bemused by alleged transgressions of morality. They both largely play the role of the "hosted" rather than the "host," and therefore generally observe and react rather than initiate influential action themselves. The chronicle of an evolving perception of one's position in a certain social structure, which occupies James in **The Portrait**, is similarly depicted in **The Ambassadors**, written twenty-two years later.

The process of observation, reflection, discovery and transformation of perception that Strether undergoes is more linear and evenly-paced than that of Isabel. He arrives in Europe with a certain preconception of Chad's situation, and concludes his stay having come full-circle from this initial mindset. Along the way his consciousness is infiltrated with encounters and reflections which propel his sensibility forth in one general direction, never truly regressing to an earlier stage of its development. This is not to say that Strether's "way" is evident and paved for him from the start. To the contrary, the very substance of **The Ambassadors** is the confounded, faltering manner with which Strether eventually finds his way to a sort of clearing in the forest of social interactions and

obligations into which he has wandered. Having reached this clearing, "he now at all events *sees*,"[35] as James puts it in his preface to the New York edition of **The Ambassadors**. "The business of my tale and the march of my action," James continues,"not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision."

Strether has come to Europe, we slowly discover, to fetch back to his hometown of Woollett, Massachusetts the purportedly delinquent son of his fiancee, Mrs Newsome. Chad is to be retrieved from his alleged frivolity and vulgar associations in Paris so that he might mend his unbecoming ways and take over his family's business. The ambiguous, yet implied thrust of Strether's quest is that, assuming he fulfills this obligation, he will be rewarded with the hand of Mrs Newsome. Thus, though disembodied to us, she acts as an irrepressible motivating force for Strether throughout the novel. The "process of vision" to which James refers in the preface is the contemporaneous loosening of Strether's conscience from the grip of this force and the incorporation of a realistic view of Chad's European life. We follow in **The Ambassadors** a near dialectic between Mrs Newsome's, and hence Strether's, original perception of Chad and the subsequent revisions springing from Strether's interpretations of reality.

James relies more exclusively on what has been referred to in my discussion of **The Portrait** as a center of consciousness method of narration than in that work. In his book, **Narrative Situations in the Novel**, critic Franz Stanzel addresses the aim of the "figural novel," which is characterized by withdrawal of the author and

orientation of narrative consciousness within the mind of a character or intimate observer:[36]

> The reader must be given the illusion of being able to follow the mental processes of the central figure directly, without the obtrusive presence of the narrator. Henry James achieved this with outstanding success in **The Ambassadors**.[37]

Almost wholly devoid of an assertive narratorial presence, the narration of **The Ambassadors** greatly diminishes the reader's awareness of the medium by which characters' thoughts must be delivered. Whereas the obtrusiveness of this conduit of information varies in **The Portrait** according to shifts between center of consciousness and authorial narration, the locus of observation throughout **The Ambassadors** is fixed almost exclusively in Strether. The effect of such an exclusive focus, of so complete a fusion of reader and character sensibility, is to heighten our sense that we are experiencing the novel's events precisely as Strether experiences them, both in the temporal and conceptual sense. Like Strether, we are always looking ahead expectantly; we are not granted the critical space to reflect on Strether's character in light of the thoughts of other characters as is the case with Isabel. And while this immobilization of the narrative center of consciousness necessarily circumscribes the scope of our insight, it allows for a more intensified and thorough exploration of character consciousness than is found in **The Portrait**. The sympathy that James elicits from the reader for Isabel is interrupted in **The Portrait** by extended narrative absences from her thoughts; and while it is certainly not dispelled during any such hiatus,

The Ambassadors exhibits so sustained an intimacy with Strether that our judgments necessarily coincide almost identically with his throughout.

Much can be determined about the nature of the narrative in **The Ambassadors** through an examination of its first paragraph. Even the first sentence speaks volumes as to what we can expect from our narrator: "Strether's first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted."[38] Not only do we lack any context in which to view Strether's thought, but we know absolutely nothing of this Strether fellow or his friend, Waymarsh. As opposed to the opening scenes in **The Portrait**, in which the narrator stands aside from the characters to tag them with descriptive statements, here James withholds all introductory discourse between narrator and reader. In fact, those attributes of Strether which we do come to recognize via narratorial offering are never compiled into an introductory format by which we may acquire a broad sense of this character's background. Rather, most of what we come to know of Strether is revealed either in conversation with certain confidantes- a topic I address below- or through our ability to recognize particular qualities that characterize his thought process.

To return to these first lines of the text, note that Strether "learns" something immediately. In a sense, this establishes a motif for the story as a whole; but more to our interest here, the manner in which we are told this positions us in a peculiar relationship to both the narrator and the character. That we are not exposed to Strether's

actual conversation with the clerk in the office suggests something of this narratorial presence; namely that he is apt to censor dialogue which fails to reflect anything about Strether's character. Such exclusivity encourages our immersion into, and sympathy for, this character's thoughts. Yet, this narrative discretion functions less to make its own presence felt than to immerse us more fully in Strether's consciousness, which it does immediately. We are told that he was "not *wholly* disconcerted," suggesting that the very subtleties of this man's imagination will not escape narrative probing.

The extreme depth and complexity which James reveals in Strether makes the choice of narrating **The Ambassadors** in the third-person an interesting one. Simply substituting "I" for "Strether" every so often would disencumber the text from the rest of its perpetual references to this character; what is now a sort of biography would become an autobiography. James' choice to narrate from an intimate third party does, however, promote two qualities in the text which are critical to James' task of presenting an accurate, palpable development of Strether's sensibility. First, we must assume in a first-person account that the narrator/character is telling the story in retrospect, and that this persona sees his or her position at any given moment in the text necessarily in light of subsequent moments as well. Regardless of the detail or attempts at objectivity, the first-person narrator is always, in telling the story, re-inventing his or her *self* , a construction which raises issues of reliability and selectivity which need not be addressed in the same form in **The Ambassadors**. While we may, to some extent, question this third-person narrator, we

need not question the validity of Strether's thoughts, for he is not the one conveying them. As Stanzel points out;

> The first-person narrator uses a rather coarse crayon to sketch a picture of his past. He employs a quick, bold stroke to compress and conclude processes which took place slowly and with no fixed line of development. Neither of these techniques would achieve the delicate shades, the bizarre contours which the mental portrait of Strether requires.[39]

While the first-person narrator necessarily re-creates a story after the fact, the third-person narrator in **The Ambassadors** is able to give the effect of following Strether from behind as he experiences the circumstances in Paris. The development of our sensibility coincides with that of Strether, as does our recognition, if not exact definition, of conflict.

Further, the use of a third-person narrator allows the reader a certain distance from Strether which would be forfeited were he to tell his own story. Although we cannot, as in **The Portrait**, rely on other characters to reflect on the central persona, we nonetheless see "around" Strether. His sensibility, despite the narrator's efforts at intimacy, is not so wholly united with our own that we are left no room for speculation and interpretation. When we are left in the hands of the narrator, James' flattering depiction of the lives of Chad and his companions grant Strether's perceptions their needed verisimilitude.

We may see "around" Strether, however slightly, in the brief and infrequent instances in which the authorial narrator nudges our view of him in a particular direction with such remarks as "Strether's

reading on such matters was, it must be owned, confused,"[40] or "Strether was luminous as he had never been."[41] While the narrator will not promote a bluntly ironic look at Strether, he may steer our perception of him through these subtler means. But we may be asked to see "around" Strether on a larger scale than this of individual impressions. I think James intends us to perceive Strether as a shade too credulous, despite his remarkable perceptiveness. Such a quality contributes to our recognition and acceptance of the acuteness of Strether's mental struggle between Chad's Paris and Mrs Newsome's Woollett. A good foil to this dimension of Strether is the second installment of "ambassadors," Sarah Pocock, in whom the capacity to be swayed is so utterly absent that entertaining such a struggle as the one we witness in Strether is unimaginable. The difficulty we have in determining the extent of Strether's credulity, however, is due to the lack of any standard against which to measure him- a function of the fixed center of consciousness narration.

Strether may, for instance, be somewhat easily swayed by the apparent refinement of Chad's character that is suggested in the gray streaks in his hair, the suave manner in which he enters the opera box, and the grace with which he carries off introductions. That Strether acknowledges to himself on several occasions that he has certainly been swept off his feet may be an indication of the possibility that he is being manipulated, or even duped by Paris and its inhabitants. The distance, then, between character and reader which allows such interpretation is provided by the presence of a third-person narrator. Such a choice on James' part cannot be seen merely as a default, for the lack of real irony and the persistent,

cumbersome references to Strether as other might suggest the efficacy of a first-person form. James' choice, therefore, must be seen as a calculated attempt at a certain effect, some aspects of which I have characterized above.

James' choice to locate the narrative consciousness almost exclusively within Strether's mind, while producing the desired effect of rendering minutely Strether's psychological development, precludes any insight gained through the ruminations of other characters, as found in **The Portrait**. As I am sure James had hoped, fusing our sensibility with Strether's makes it more difficult to form a critical appraisal of his actions. Such an appraisal would detract from our appreciation of the process depicted and its contributing forces, draining the vitality and urgency from the intended conflict between social obligation and individual autonomy. Nevertheless, there are times in the novel at which James must foster such an appraisal in order that we become better equipped to interpret his experience. And having relinquished the external voice which might supply us with evaluative statements, James creates the character of Maria Gostrey.

Maria's role in **The Ambassadors** is that of the *confidante* or, as James calls her in his preface, the *ficelle*. She can hardly be perceived as a full-fledged "character," her office is so decidedly one-dimensional, but rather as a convention or construct by which we are granted access to Strether's disposition. As James says, "She is an enrolled, a direct, aid to lucidity."[42] Maria enters the text primarily when we need to form a foundation on which to evaluate Strether's performance, sporadically throughout the beginning, and again in the

very end. She acts as a conversational sounding-board, pressing Strether with questions to which she seems to know many of the answers, delving into the murkiest corners of his thoughts to scare up his underlying assumptions and flesh out his disposition. When, at first, we need to be told what "our friend" looks like, James couches his description in terms of Maria's perspective, without actually invoking her thoughts: "What she might have taken in with a vision kindly adjusted, was the lean, slightly loose figure of a man of the middle height..."[43]

More importantly, however, Maria forces Strether to concretize through dialogue his sentiments regarding his task and Chad's character. This is a boon to the reader, who must otherwise contend with Strether thoughts alone, which are fairly consistently noncommittal: His diplomacy often extends even to his own inner discourse. But Maria crystallizes Strether's thoughts for us on the page:

> "Well," said Strether, "*I'm* quite content to let it, as one of the signs, pass for the worst that I know [Chad] believes he can do what he likes with me."
> This appeared to strike her. "How do you know it?"
> "Oh, I know it. I can feel it in my bones."
> "Feel that he *can* do it?"
> "Feel that he believes he can. It may come to the same thing!" Strether laughed.
> She wouldn't, however, have this. "Nothing with you will ever come to the same thing as anything else."[44]

In a sense, Maria Gostrey assumes the nearly vacant position in **The Ambassadors** of an omniscient narrative voice, pulling Strether out of his shell and evaluating, though with a consistently flattering touch, the character he bares to her. The narrator suggests her quasi-

omniscience with regard to Strether's character when he says obliquely, "She knew even intimate things about him that he had not yet told her and perhaps never would."[45] Similarly, her privileged position in the novel is acknowledged by Strether as he wrestles with his conflict: "He couldn't even formulate to himself his being strange and queer. It had taken place- the process- somewhere deep down. Maria Gostrey had caught glimpses of it. But how was he to fish it up, even if he desired, for Mrs Pocock?"[46] We can view Maria, then, less as a "character" in the traditional sense than as a convention by which James, having chosen the fixed center of consciousness as the predominant mode of narration, skirts the limitations he has imposed on the narrative. Much of the little critical insight into Strether's character with which James equips the reader is conveyed through Maria Gostrey's pointed discussion rather than the determinations of the narrator or other characters.

V. Revisiting **The Portrait** in light of **The Ambassadors**

The mode of narration employed throughout **The Ambassadors** may be likened to that which James eventually arrives at in **The Portrait**. Subsequent to Chapter 50 of **The Portrait**, the shifting center of consciousness, previously concerned with the experience of characters other than Isabel, comes to rest in Isabel's mind, removing itself only to narrate from an authorial perspective. We no longer see from other points of view, or even visit the realm of experience of another character (save the brief, anomalous plunge into Madame Merle I discussed above); it is as though James has finally

pared his story down to the very core: Isabel's consciousness of her circumstance. The revelation that the Countess Gemini provides Isabel of Madame Merle's true identity as Pansy's mother effectively halts our concern with the various tributary plots which have each contributed more or less directly to the central issue of Isabel's situation. They have, at this point, run their course and the reader's sensibility is suddenly unified with Isabel's with a sympathy unsurpassed in the novel. Prior to this epistemological windfall we have read with a certain critical ignorance, an illusion not unlike the one Isabel has also harbored. We have, however, been privy to elements of the story which enable us to see "around" Isabel and view her circumstance more objectively than she through the shifting center of consciousness. Even in Chapter 49 we observe the oblique interaction between Osmond and Madame Merle which concludes with the latter's despairing remark, "Have I been so vile all for nothing?"[47] Our suspicion has peaked and we are ripe for the disillusionment brought about by the Countess Gemini's candor. It sends us reeling in a manner similar to Isabel, retrospectively searching for meaning that we necessarily could not previously recognize. We must, in a sense, start over alongside Isabel, rethinking her situation in terms of our/her enlightenment and scrutinizing her reaction to this unprecedented, though devastating, lucidity.

The intimacy that is therefore achieved between Isabel and the reader is reflected in the manner in which James chooses to tell the rest of the story. Heretofore Isabel has always been kept at a variable distance from us because of our more omniscient stance. No longer do we sense the narrator granting us this privilege; rather he obscures

himself behind the turmoil that confronts Isabel, never emerging as an embodied persona but only as a voice of observation of the scene. A comparison of the following two passages, the first from this portion of **The Portrait** and the second from **The Ambassadors**, illustrates their stylistic similarity:

> Then [Isabel] wondered whether it were vain and stupid to think so well of herself. When had it ever been a guarantee to be valuable? Was not all history full of the destruction of precious things? Was it not much more probable that if one were delicate one would suffer? It involved then, perhaps, an admission that one had a certain grossness; but Isabel recognized, as it passed before her eyes, the quick, vague shadow of a long future. She would not escape; she should last.[48]

> [Strether] knew, knew as he had not even yet known, that nothing else than what Chad had done and had been would have led to his present showing. They had made him, these things, what he was, and the business had not been easy; it had taken time and trouble, it had cost, above all, a price. The result, at any rate, was now to be offered to Sally; which Strether, so far as that was concerned, was glad to be there to witness. Would she in the least make it out or take it in, the result, or would she in the least care for it if she did?[49]

The acute focus on one character's sensibility which pervades **The Ambassadors** is similarly adhered to in the culmination of **The Portrait**, and the manner in which these are presented naturally share certain qualities. Our immersion into these characters' consciousnesses is so complete that we dwell there for extended periods of narrative time and make easy transitions between what I have been referring to as psycho-narration- "She wondered whether it were vain and stupid..."- and narrated monologue- "Would she in the

least make it out..?" Making this transition is an important means by which James embeds us more fully in his character's mind, suppressing our awareness of the otherness of the character whose thoughts are transposed. The intimacy thus achieved is the desired effect throughout **The Ambassadors**, but only sporadically until the final chapters of **The Portrait**, when our subject has been exclusively defined.

While I would not suggest that the eventually prevailing method of telling Isabel's story would have been appropriate for the entire work, it does seem that the narrative undergoes a transformation itself in its approach to representation. By the final few chapters the personified narrator no longer inserts himself between the reader and Isabel's quickening sensibility, which we are to feel now most forcefully. It is in these final chapters that James needs most to preserve our sympathy for Isabel, as she is faced with the fundamental conflict of the novel- to leave Osmond and pursue the previously deceptive path toward individual freedom, or to remain and acknowledge, in effect, the illusory nature of such a pursuit for a woman in her position. For this choice to be a living conflict in the mind of the reader, we must be made to feel that there is something of Isabel's character at stake in the matter; and the more intimately James can manipulate our sensibility into accordance with hers, the more successful he will be at achieving this end.

In arriving at this point, however, as I have suggested, we find a disjunctiveness in James' treatment of character thought and narratorial responsibility. I wish now to demonstrate how the consistency, though not necessarily the actual choice, of narrative

strategy in **The Ambassadors** renders the process of narrating the development of a character's sensibility, as dictated by his or her environment, less problematic. I have referred earlier to my sense of the inconsistency the reader encounters when confronted with a narrator who would mask his influence in the very act of revealing his personified presence. The narrator who tells us that Isabel has her faults, but for the explicit reason of preserving her dignity refuses to reveal them is a narrator whose role is unclear: Will he paint for us an "objective" representation of Isabel and her circumstances, or will he somehow distort what he "knows" of Isabel so as to engender a particular perception of her in the reader? Certainly these alternatives are not mutually exclusive, for inevitably the act of narration involves incorporating some of the latter into the former; narrating is inherently selective. Nevertheless, the narrator of **The Portrait** runs the risk of undermining his every effort to faithfully represent the development of Isabel's consciousness if he openly concedes to an "interested" approach. I do not care to question the trustworthiness of representation in **The Portrait**, for that is a separate discussion altogether, but rather call attention to the lack of clarity of the narrator's role.

There is no question, from the start, that the principal aim of the narrator in **The Ambassadors** is to expose the reader to Strether's thoughts. We are incorporated into Strether's character immediately and remain there with a permanence that lends certainty to the narrator's purpose. James gives us no indication of the possible inefficacy of the established narrative patterns such as is evident in the following aforementioned passage in **The Portrait**: "Though I

have tried to speak with extreme discretion, the reader may have gathered a suspicion that Gilbert Osmond was not untainted by selfishness." Surely, James is to some extent creating a self-conscious narrator who is poking fun at his own role; it seems likely that his underlying intent is to bolster our feeling that Osmond was, in fact, tainted by selfishness." Nevertheless, such a statement promotes a cross-current between the intention of the narrative and the effect of the external narrator: While the narrative on the whole would subdue our natural efforts to define character through categorization and simplification, the latter undermines the intention to preserve ambiguity by rendering such a task artificial. By immersing his reader so inextricably in the mind of Strether in **The Ambassadors**, James eludes the subversive implication of such a narrator's compensatory gestures. For if Strether is capable of tremendous insight, he is equally as *incapable* of formulating concrete moral judgments based on that insight. Whether it be because he is unwilling to do so, or because he simply hasn't the evaluative tools in his makeup, we are almost solely dependent upon his equivocal ruminations for our conception of the society to which we are exposed. The efficacy of such a method in denying the reader a critical consciousness sufficient to formulate definitive interpretations of character ameliorates the kind of difficulty James confronts in the narrative strategies of **The Portrait.**

The inconsistencies that arise in **The Portrait** from what I have called "qualified" psycho-narration and from the narrator's explicit refusal to enter a character's previously explored consciousness are similarly ameliorated in **The Ambassadors** by virtue of the

stationary center of consciousness narration. The narrator commits to a comprehensive representation of Strether's thoughts and sustains this intimacy consistently. James does not maneuver the narrator into a position of narratorial uncertainty or non-omniscience which may, as is the case in **The Portrait**, be both previously and subsequently betrayed. And although the stationary center of consciousness prohibits any critical understanding of Strether's character offered by external sources, it provides the framework for a consistent treatment of character, devoid of contradictory instances of narratorial empowerment.

In my discussion of the problematic aspects of the narration of **The Portrait** I suggested the falsity of appearance we feel if we examine Isabel's evolving sense of Madame Merle. Specifically, I was concerned with the off-hand manner in which James engenders in Isabel a conspicuous distaste for Madame Merle prior to the watershed revelation by the Countess in Chapter 51. My quarrel on this point was that James' method of fostering this sentiment in his reader via Isabel's consciousness hinges on the credibility of the initial appearance of such a sentiment in Isabel herself. Despite the fact that we have been given enough insight into Madame Merle's character (through the narrator and other characters) to taint our perception of her, Isabel seems neither to have amassed sufficient incriminating evidence nor sharpened her critical eye to the extent that the appearance in her mind of such a sudden suspicion would be anything more than a contrivance on James' part.

The space James allows the reader to so reductively scrutinize the epistemology of Isabel's character stems from the shifts in the

narrative away from and back to her consciousness. For in each shift we are exposed to a perspective, be it that of another character or of the narrator, which carries certain assumptions about Isabel. And from these assumptions spring accompanying expectations. In this case we might say that Ralph expects Isabel to recognize the murky undercurrent in Madame Merle's behavior, while Osmond expects her to remain unassuming. Our exposure to these views puts us in a unique position when placed by the narrator back into Isabel's consciousness; for while we accompany her through her impressions, we also run a step ahead, playing *our* expectations of her capacity to know against what James *tells* us she knows. No such disparity exists in **The Ambassadors**, our fusion with Strether's consciousness is so permanent and complete. We are not given the opportunity to play our expectations of what Strether recognizes against what James tells us he recognizes because these are unified by the immobility of our point of view. We have as little idea as Strether how Madame de Vionnet ought to be perceived, for example, and therefore our inquiry into her character proceeds only as rapidly as Strether's perceptiveness allows. Since we are given comparatively little room to anticipate Strether's ruminations, James negates the possibility of creating an epistemological incongruity such as the one I sense in **The Portrait.**

VI. Concluding remarks

James writes in **The Art of Fiction**, "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."[50] And in

his attempt to approximate reality in these two works, James anticipates that our response will be governed by those very human tendencies which manifest themselves in our own experience. Just as we inevitably evaluate and draw boundaries- both consciously and unconsciously- around the individuals and events we encounter in our lives in order to bring meaning to them, so do we when we experience James' fictional "realities." As James recognizes, however, our experiences are nonetheless riddled with ambiguity and complexity in spite of our efforts. James task of representing reality in these works is qualified by his desire to capture this fundamental dimension of human existence in order to create the tension and conflict he needs to convey. The narrative methods he employs in **The Portrait** and **The Ambassadors** are variations in means to this common end. James preserves the ambiguity and complexity of character in Isabel and Strether to subdue our judgment, our attempts to sharply define their motivations. So long as the author refrains from painting these characters into a particular corner of their social and moral environment, they remain largely exempt from ironic treatment. And as ironic treatment curtails our sense of a character's potential, a lack thereof awakens our sensibility to the freedoms with which James invests Isabel and Strether. These freedoms, in conjunction with the forces which impede them, engender the fundamental conflicts of these novels.

I have located, in **The Portrait**, implications of the narrative choices James makes which may detract from the efficacy of the narrative to foster the intended response in the reader. The fact that twenty-two years subsequent to publishing **The Portrait** James

writes **The Ambassadors**, which exhibits a different approach to similar concerns, justifies an exploration of method such as the one I have pursued here. I hope to have demonstrated that in fixing the center of consciousness in his treatment of Strether's experience, James immunizes **The Ambassadors** to the subversive elements I locate in the narration of **The Portrait**, and thereby achieves a more consistent and forceful means to realizing the conflict between social obligation and individual freedom.

NOTES

[1] Richard Poirier, **The Comic Sense of Henry James** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 205.

[2] Ibid., 202.

[3] Henry James, **The Portrait of a Lady** (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1963), 178.

[4] Wayne Booth, **The Rhetoric of Fiction** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 161.

[5] Peter Buitenhuis, **Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Portrait of a Lady** (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 7.

[6] Henry James, **The Art of the Novel** (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 48.

[7] **Portrait**, 234.

[8] Dorrit Cohn, **Transparent Minds** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 14.

[9] **Portrait**, 20.

[10] **Portrait**, 304.

[11] **Portrait**, 281.

[12] Cohn, ibid., 25.

[13] Ibid., 14.

[14] **Portrait**, 391.

[15] **Portrait**, 95.

[16] Gerard Genette, **Narrative Discourse** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 31.

[17] **Portrait**, 208.

[18] **Portrait**, 360.

[19] Booth, ibid., 20.

[20] **Portrait**, 280.

[21] Poirier, ibid., 187.

[22] **Portrait**, 47.

[23]Poirier, ibid., 207.

[24]Ibid., 209 and James, **The Art of Fiction** (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888), 5.

[25]**Portrait**, 18.

[26]**Portrait**, 102.

[27]**Portrait**, 195.

[28]**Portrait**, 301.

[29]**Portrait**, 508.

[30]James, **Art of Fiction**, 8.

[31]**Portrait**, 446.

[32]**Portrait**, 376.

[33]Poirier alludes to this aspect of the novel on p. 203 of **The Comic Sense of Henry James**. He writes, "Though [Mr Touchett] tells [Isabel] that he has heard her 'take such opposite views,' he does not hold her to any strict accountability for them. And neither does James, a fact which can explain the difficulty and peculiarity of this novel."

[34]**Portrait**, 373.

[35]James, **The Art of the Novel**, 308.

[36]Franz Stanzel, **Narrative Situations in The Novel** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 92.

[37]Ibid., 99.

[38]Henry James, **The Ambassadors** (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1962), 5.

[39]Stanzel, ibid., 98.

[40]**Ambassadors**, 180.

[41]**Ambassadors**, 204.

[42]James, **The Art of the Novel**, 322.

[43]**Ambassadors**, 8.

[44]**Ambassadors**, 45.

[45]**Ambassadors**, 10.

[46]**Ambassadors**, 222.

[47]**Ambassadors**, 484.

[48]**Portrait**, 517.

[49]**Ambassadors**, 216.

[50]James, **The Art of Fiction**, 5.

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