

The Portrait of a Lady

H. James

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Henry James is funny, yet the prevailing impression is one of tedium. How come? I read him as a teenager, and decided that he was blood-less. That judgment remains today. I have since then been reluctant to tackle his longer novels, but a few years ago I read some of his shorter, because after all he was the brother of one of my favorites - William James, and also he has a reputation of being exquisite, at least when it comes to the delineation of psychological subtlety. I also suspected that I as a mature reader would get much more out of him than I did as a teenager, when I read him more out of bravado than out of anything else. But that is the point of your teens, to venture out onto thin ice.

How should one characterize the prose of James, beyond that of it being blood-less? One thinks of a rich fruitcake of which one can only take small morsels one at a time. It proceeds in a very measured way, with great exactness and subtlety. When he makes a point, he tries very conscientiously for the right word and the necessary qualification. It takes an effort, and the reader is made conscious of the effort, but an effort should not pay attention to itself, when it does, it produces fatigue. This does not exclude felicitous phrases and beautiful expressions, every fruit cake has its juicy raisins, but they arrest rather than push you along. A comparison with Proust is illuminative. With Proust you race through, or rather you follow the flow of words tumbling down on top of each other, the one beautiful metaphor supplementing the previous, as one wave following upon the other, and even after having read many thousands of pages, you feel that they have passed far too quickly, and you feel sorry when you come to the end. With James you feel a man in constipation and when the reading is done, relief is the dominant emotion. Why is James tedious? Because he lavishes so much on what is of little intrinsic interest. One may argue that the subject matter is not what counts, that is merely an excuse for showing your mastery, just as the old masters often took pleasure in depicting some mundane object, just in order to show off their technical skill. Subject matters do matter, in literature as well as in painting and life in general. If the subject matter does not grip you, its depiction will feel like a chore.

James wrote most of his novels at the end of the 19th century. That was the golden age of the novel, and all of James is written in that tradition, even refining it and in some measures renewing it. To really appreciate James you need to show his relative merits, and in order to do so, you need to compare him with his contemporaries. We have the Great Russians of course, and among those Turgenev, whom he met personally, may have been the closest to him in temperament. We also have Dickens who wrote just a few decades before him, and whose works seem rather removed from those of James, apart from their lengths and their serialization¹. More appropriate are comparisons with George Eliot and

¹ The tradition of serializing novels show their affinity with the soap-operas of today. While the soaps of Dickens were vulgar, those of James catered to the audiences who today would turn to 'Downton Abbey'

Elizabeth Gaskell, not to mention his own contemporary and compatriot Edith Wharton. What is said to count in the favor of James is not so much his psychological subtleties, but the way he conveys them. This means his attempts to produce the effect of interior monologue, of suggesting the nature of thought, especially as it pertains to the mundane. In other words, James as a literary artist is a painter of still life, showing his skill in the depiction of the passing and the effervescent, for its own sake. His obvious weakness, and one I have a very hard time to forgive him, is his inability to paint a physical scene, to suggest a presence. The locations of his scenes take place in some ghastly void, just as the scenes of a theatre play, being acted out against minimal scenography. There is in other words a lack of sensuality, which in visual representations, as films, can easily be filled, and which, according to David Lodge, makes him such gratifying material for such exercises, and which no doubt have contributed to his renaissance for the last forty odd years.

There is not much action in 'The Portrait of a Lady'. It takes place among American expatriates, who make their livings on England, Paris or Italy. They are rich and they are bored. But there is a great variability of financial fortune as well as of boredom which makes for gradients and action. Isabella Archer is a young girl recently orphaned who is taken up by an eccentric American lady, her aunt in fact, who commutes across the Atlantic, her rich husband residing in England in a huge English manor - Gardencourt. The couple has a son, a young man suffering from consumption. The two cousins have in fact never met due to a family feud, resolved through the demise of the father of the young woman. The object of her aunt is to bring the young woman into the world, i.e. into the world of wealthy expatriates in which she moves, and her sentimental education all starts in the English mansion where every male is falling in love with her. The old man, her uncle by marriage, is too old to woo her, her cousin too sick, but the third man, the neighbor, the English lord on the other hand, has no such impediments and makes her suit. The young girl Isabel refuses his excellent offer, feeling that she has just started out in life and does not want to tie herself down right away. Her cousin and his father express their love in another manner, the source of which remains unknown to her, but not the effect. She is bequeathed a minor fortune, taken from the prospective inheritance of the son, in order to put some wind into her sails. Upon the death of her uncle, she is a rich girl. She goes to Paris, she goes further south to Italy, and settles temporarily with her aunt in Florence. Meanwhile she has already before the demise of her uncle met a remarkable woman, a certain Mme Merle, a house guest at Gardencourt. She is thoroughly charmed by her, her worldliness and her accomplishments. Obviously she is the woman fate has thrown in her way for her proper education. Her aunt, charming as she is, is obviously far too eccentric to be of value. Mme Merle introduces her to a friend of hers, a certain Gilbert Osmond, another American expatriate living a life of fastidious leisure under modest financial circumstances in Florence. Merle wants to set her up to marry her protegee, and he is delighted by the prospects, her fortune playing a conclusive part. He also has a daughter by name of Pansy from a marriage that ended in widowhood. He eventually proposes to her, but she is not ready yet but embarks on a more ambitious trip eastwards involving, Greece, Turkey and Egypt. But once she is back she succumbs to the offer of marriage. In fact she feels that she has had a freedom and that she is tired of it.

and similar productions.

She has seen the world and can settle down. Her aunt is aghast at the match and rightly suspects that her friend Merle has set it up, notwithstanding her professions to prevent it. Such duplicity she cannot tolerate and cuts off her ties of friendship. Her cousin tries to dissuade her, but he is caught in a difficult situation. Only if his efforts are successful will they justify themselves, otherwise they would lead to an end of friendship. He takes the risk in the end, in spite of trepidation and wavering, and he predictably fails in his quest.

A few years are allowed to pass and we meet our circle again. Isabel and her husband are comfortably settled in Rome on her money. She is not happy. Between the husband and wife there is an estrangement. She so young full of life, stifled by the fastidious coldness of her husband. Just as her aunt and uncle led lives apart, but amicably so, they too have drifted apart, but yet maliciously confined within the same cage and silence. The lord, her snubbed suitor, reappears again, this time pretending to make court to Pansy who in the interim has grown up to a young woman. This is a match that greatly gratifies both Osmond and Mme Merle, and they expect Isabel to bring it about, to use the influence she has on the lord. Isabel does what she is expected to do, but reluctantly. Pansy is in fact taken by the suit of a young man, an old friend of Isabel, but that is a match Pansy's father wants nothing of. It is clear that the old suitor only does it to come closer to his true object of love. He eventually realizes this and gives it all up. Her husband is furious, assuming that she has willfully sabotaged the match. Once thereafter catching them unawares, Isabel is struck by the silent intimacy between her friend Merle and her husband. Her suspicions are being confirmed by her sister-in-law who spills the story that Osmond and Mme Merle was once lovers and that the child was actually that of Mme Merle not of the deceased wife. This intelligence sets her free to defy the commands of her husband not to travel back to England to visit her cousin who is dying. Back at Gardencourt she has the chance to admit her failure and her unhappiness to her cousin, during his last lucid moment before slipping into death. In many ways it is the emotional high-point of the novel. In the aftermath the lord makes a last bid for her, but she turns it down and decides, much to the frustration of the reader, to go back to Rome and her husband. Does she after all think of it as her duty to stick to a bad decision, only because it was her decision and freely entered into?

This is a short resume of the plot, but it misses very little, except a few peripheral characters playing supporting roles, have deliberately been removed. Thus in short, the plot provides little of entertainment or excitement, but the action is stretched out. One is reminded of a mathematical proof in which no detail is considered too insignificant to be omitted. James relentlessly lets the story unfold page by page. Yet, to be honest and fair, not without a certain artfulness. He is after all an accomplished practitioner of the craft. It is not that he lacks skills, only that he is too eager to display them. At the heart of the novel there is no murder mystery, although one could very well imagine James in a later age writing detective stories, only the revelation that Isabel friend Mme Merle is in fact wicked. The fact that Pansy the daughter is actually hers, has something melodramatic about it, and the way the girl is passed off as the progeny of the diseased wife is somewhat artificial and not fully believable. In a realistic novel you expect realistic solutions.

Now plot is not everything to a novel, although it helps to make it readable as well as to stimulate the efforts and inspire the imagination the author. Scenery and sense

of time are important as well, and here, as I have already regretfully remarked, James shows his deficiencies. True there is a certain sense of time, this is of course unintentional and a charm only becoming manifested much later, as with a photograph which with the inevitable passing of time has acquired a patina of nostalgia not present at its inception². The true point of a novel is to present living characters, rounded three-dimensional beings, whom we love to know, and whose tribulations we are quite concerned with. Ideally the master novelist not only shows portraits of people, he makes movies of them, showing convincingly how they develop in time. In this regard James has some success as well as abysmal failure. Let us start with the failure. Of course subsidiary characters are not to be expected to be fully drawn, in fact such attention would only distract. Most of the faces that we encounter are in crowds and have no impact on us, as humans there are only a limited number of people we can endow with individuality. It is a pity, that nowadays so many of those individualized faces do not belong to people we can interact with, but are mere phantoms in the media, (and in fact even characters in novels or soaps). However there is one character Goodwood who plays a crucial role and thus needs to be realistically drawn, that James has completely botched up. Goodwood is a suitor from the old world who doggedly stalks her and makes her suit. He comes across as a stiff piece of wood, and hardly more articulate. His court upsets her, but if so, why does she not call the police? There seems to be no emotional attachment of hers to him, how could there be to a piece of wood? He returns at regular intervals, all the time presenting his futile quest. He makes the acquaintance with her husband, and willing to obey any wishes of his eternally unrequited love he consents to accompany her dying cousin back to England so that she can get rid of him. He makes one final appearance when he kisses her. It comes across as a case of rape, but in the perverted imagination of James it is construed as awakening physical passion, and as such on the level of a trashy romance. In short the whole exercise is abominable done, and the character of Goodwood could easily have been excised from the story altogether without any loss, on the contrary. The snubbed suitor Lord Warburton is enough to play that role, and without the distracting rivalry of Goodwood, that role would come across even stronger. The depiction of Pansy is also something of an embarrassment, and one feels indicative of the unfamiliarity of the bachelor James with children. She is at first depicted as a ten-year old, although she is supposed to be fifteen. It is hard for me to accept that a fifteen year old girl could be so innocent unless she is mentally retarded. Thus when we a couple of years later meet her again, this time taking pleasures in dancing, and being the object of Lord Warburtons ostensible desire, we are unpleasantly touched, as if this worthy gentleman is about to commit an act of pedophilia. That characters like Henrietta Stackpole, the American journalist, and her adoring companion Mt Bantling, are kind of stock-characters we readily forgive the author. They fit the role admirably. Also the countess Gemini, the sister-in-law of Isabel, is also something of a caricature (and indeed James does an accomplished visual characterization of her as her introduction) but fits well in and does her part admirably. However, that such a flirt and a gossip (her marriage with an Italian count is supposed to be a disaster, and as a consequence she scandalizes society by her many extra-curricular affairs) should have kept such a momentous secret for so long

² Although that potentiality is often present in the mind of the photographer, the point of a photo is to arrest time by killing it, and thus to preserve it into the future.

strains the readers credulity. The characters of Mr and Mrs Touchett, the uncle and the aunt, are competently drawn, especially the latter, who comes across well, although (or maybe because) she is only sketched, A no nonsense American lady, who in spite of her idiosyncrasies sees through society. I am well aware, that my presentation of characters very much resembles the final display after the curtain has been lowered and raised again, presenting the minor characters first and leading up to the leading roles. There is Lord Warburton, who comes across as a little bit too good and perfect to be fully believable. If developed I am afraid that he would turn into a Lord Peter Whimsey character. His accomplishment in the novel being that of a politician, in fact the only figure in the gallery, with the possible exception of Mr Touchett, who does anything worthwhile and seem to have some kind of mission. His repeated court of our heroin Isabel, only drives home the fact, as it may be intended to, that Isabel really should have chosen him instead. That her fulfillment, whatever that could have been, was so close at hand. Why did she refuse such a perfect suitor. Mrs Touchett could never understand why, and we as readers cannot chose but to agree with her. Yet our regrets are not deep enough to warrant almost six hundred pages (or three hundred thousand words) of attention³ We are now left with the four central characters. That of the cousin - Ralph Touchett, the false friend Mme Merle, the husband Osborn, and finally the heroine herself - Isabel. Ralph Touchett is easily the most sympathetic character of them all, and one presumes the most disinterested lover of Isabel. His death scene is the most touching in the novel. Mme Merle definitely is of diabolic interest second only to Osmond, who may be the imaginatively most developed of the characters. His coldness is elegantly conveyed by his conversation. He does not go for the hyperbole but manages with very small means convey his power and displeasure. He is of course immensely egoistical, but such characters tend to be interesting, in social life and even more so in fiction, maybe because egotism is the easiest to convey, and also the kind of emotion readers can most easily identify with. In this lies also the moral force of a novel. Of holding up a mirror to the reader and make him or her disgusted by what they see in themselves.

Finally the heroine. She is in many ways a void, and that is of course deliberate. We are not asked to take an interest in her, only an interest in the emotions that she evokes in others. Much of the irony of the novel lies in the contrast between her ostensible sophistication and her naivety. To go back to what I just wrote above about the incredulity of the Countess to keep such a secret. Of course the secret was never kept but common tacit knowledge in the social circle. Tacit and hence a common secret. The Countess is not very sophisticated yet she is surprised that she has to dot the i's. Does Isabel really not see that the two of them, Mme Merle and Osborne once were lovers and that the child Pansy was the fruit of that illegal union?

³ The book consists of about one million and a half of characters. It was written in about eighteen months which translates into a work-pace of 3000 characters a day, which is far from being excessive. Maybe James spent a mere two hours a day actually writing things down, a few more hours to think about things, but most of the day, taking care of social responsibilities, including epistolary, and taking solitary walks thinking of his relationships with publishers and other professional advancements. What makes things pile up in the end are not sporadic frantic efforts, but steady application, whose intensity is not so much an issue as its sustainment. This is the true lesson of discipline.

But character delineation may not really be the ultimate goal of James. He is not so much interested in individual psychology as such, but psychological states. Thus Goodwood is not so much created for his own sake, as for representing the blindness of unrequited love. The egocentric love that cannot really understand let alone fathom, that such sentimental sentiments are not necessarily mutual. In the very illusion of love there is the notion of mutuality. If the other person professes not love, she or he is mistaken. Love is an objective state, and as such an internality that is a palpable externality. Thus the spectre of a besotted individual is one of terror⁴.

But there are other pleasures of the novel, independent of plot, evocation of scenery and time and character delineation, and those are words of wisdom to be plucked out at regular intervals, engaging dialogue and more abstractedly it could be the language itself that enchants. Still the quality of prose cannot always be isolated from what it speaks about, and language alone can never salvage a text which is deficient in all other respects. As to James prose it is of course impeccable. Some would say exquisite, others would say dry, neither judgment contradicting the other. As has already been indicated, it is measured and characterized by an overriding ambition to be precise. It is thus not particularly flowery, although at times, as we will see below, it allows itself to unfold in an almost proustian manner, but such indulgencies of excess are rare. In short his prose is a fair representation of his temperament, had it not been, he would hardly be able to sustain it year out and year in.

His dialogue is funny at times, and you think of Oscar Wilde; but unlike Wilde his funniness is not really hilarious and does not call attention to itself. Still it is funny enough to make you occasionally doubt that the author is serious, maybe his mission is only to amuse himself. But funny as he might be, the fun parts are drowned in the general molassic flow, and thus do not really threaten to undercut his ambition. So let us dip into the novel and dredge up some samples for further inquiry.

Here is Henrietta Stackpole lecturing her friend⁵.

And you can't always please yourself; you must sometimes please other people. That, I admit, you're ready to do; but there's another thing that's still more important -you must often displease others. You must always be ready for that -you must never shrink from it. That doesn't suit you at all - you're too fond of admiration, you like to be thought well of. You think we can escape disagreeable duties by taking romantic views - that's your great illusion, my dear. But we can't. You must be prepared on many occasions in life to please no one at all - not even yourself.

How true! And nicely put too (I must admit that the colloquial touches of *can't* instead of 'cannot' etc grates on me a little, but that is a trivial objection, and James one concession to speech), Words of wisdom indeed. But how does it fit into the structure of the novel and to the character of Isabel. Is that really a peculiarity of hers, a failing that

⁴ Most critics seem to disagree with me. Goodwood may inspire terror in Isabel, not only exasperation. The terror being her own repressed sexual desire that Goodwood threatens to set aflame. This might very well have been the intention of James to convey, but if so he went about it singularly ineptly.

⁵ Middle of page 217 in the Penguin Modern Classics edition of 1963.

got her into trouble. Could it be so simple that once she learns this fact of life, she will be better off? It is one thing to identify and formulate a so called fact of life, quite another thing to apply it. Generally such things are too abstractly formulated to be technically applicable. They may serve as beautiful rationalizations after the fact, but seldom can they guide you in specific situations. It may sound very good, but inevitably whatever you do, you will end up disappointing people, including yourself. So in a literal sense it is a tautology. But there are of course other senses, and even the most prosaic of sayings can be endowed with unsuspected depth, if properly associated to a situation.

Now to other things. How can we get a glimpse of the cynicism of Mme Merle? The following exchange between Osmond and his former lover constitute a key⁶.

- *What do you want to do with her? (he asked at last).*
- *What you see. Put her in your way.*
- *Isn't she meant for something better than that?*
- *I don't pretend to know what people are meant for [...] I only know what I can do with them.*

Osmond pretends to be shocked then his parting words are *You're looking very well' [...] You have some idea. You're never so well as when you've got an idea; they're always becoming to you.* I guess the reader should now be alerted to their scheme and their duplicitous characters.

As to flowering language. The introductory presentation of Countess Gemini (the sister of Gilbert Osmond) already alluded to, is in its entirety as follows⁷

Isabel could see she was a woman of high fashion. She was thin and dark and not at all pretty, having features that suggested some tropical bird - a long beak-like nose, small, quickly-moving eyes, and a mouth and a chin that receded extremely. Her expression, however, thanks to various intensities of emphasis and wonder, of horror and joy, was not inhuman, and, as regards her appearance, it was plain she understood herself and made most of her points. Her attire, voluminous and delicate, bristling with elegance, had the look of shimmering plumage, and her attitudes were as light and sudden as those of a creature who perched upon twigs. She had a great deal of manner; Isabel, who had never known anyone with such manner, immediately classed her as the most affected of women.

This is a rare indulgence of James. Note that instead of simply writing 'bird' James resorts to a kenning - 'a creature who perched upon twigs'. Why lavish so much on a subordinate character? Nothing that James does is without intention. (Whether the intentions are brought about is another matter.) The intention is, I guess, to show explicit in his sister what is hidden in Osmond himself. Isabel sees at once that the Countess is a fool, a mere show of manner. That Osmond is not different, she will only learn at her peril. Osmond is quite aware of the deficiencies of his sister, to him she must be something of an embarrassment. *My sister needs a grammar* he explains to Isabel *but unfortunately she's not grammatical* he continues. Isabel on the other hand is taken in by Osmond at

⁶ page 240 ibid

⁷ page 254 ibid

that first encounter. *Her mind contained no class offering a natural place to Mr Osmond - he was a specimen apart.* Not that she formed those truth right away, the author warns us, but they fell into place gradually. As he notes *She had never met a person of so fine a grain* and very important *He was an original without being a eccentric.* She starts to worry about the impression she will make on him. She does not care about exposing her ignorance, after all she was intent to learn from life. But she fears that he will find he perceptions gross. Note that she is not worried about intelligence and cleverness, nor about sincerity of heart, but mere taste. And taste is all what Osmond is about, something she is instinctively sensing without appreciating its wider ramifications. She is becoming fascinated by Osmond, and that is understandable enough. Now James spends pages and pages dwelling on her incipient fascination, careful not to miss any nuances. He does a thorough job. This indeed can fascinate a sympathetic reader who lets him or herself one swallowed up in his world, just as it can strike the more impatient reader as somewhat tedious.

As to nature descriptions. As I have already noted, those are rare in James, and seldom if ever successful. Here we have an example⁸

The sun had got low, the golden light took a deeper tone, and on the mountains and the plain that stretched beneath them the masses of purple shadow glowed as richly as the places that were still exposed. The scene had an extraordinary charm. The air was almost solemnly still, and the large expanse of the landscape, with its gardenlike culture and nobleness of outline, its teeming valley and delicately-fretted hills, its peculiarly human-looking touches of habitation, lay there in splendid harmony and classic grace'

It is not that James does not try. It is hard to find fault with it, still there is something missing. One may possibly point out the lack of the significant detail, the arresting image. As an example, later on in the novel, he refers to the hapless suitor Rosier arriving at Rome worrying about the malaria season. Such a remark is significant and arresting. There is no further reference to it, which is a pity. The 'nature morte' he paints, is competent enough, but does it have a punch line? What is really missing may not necessarily be missing in the text itself. As we say in Swedish - one swallow does not necessarily herald a summer. For nature descriptions to work they need to permeate the text, provide a theme by itself, but one which constantly interacts with the plot. Admittedly this is exactly what James does with this piece of 'pleine air' painting. *You seem so well pleased that I think yo can be trusted to come back* he lets Osmond remark as he leads his companion to one of the angles of the terrace. Isabel responds to the effect that she will certainly do so, and starts to think that it would not be so bad after all to live in Italy, and that her mission in life (whatever that is) could be quite compatible with settling in Florence.

There are a few playful metaphors, of the kind that Proust excels in. When Lord Warburton decides not to pursue his suit of Pansy, Osmond having his ambitions thwarted is furious.

I can't say much more for the great Warburton. When one really thinks of it,

⁸ page 264 ibid

the cool insolence of his performance was something rare! He comes and looks at one's daughter as if she were a suite of apartments; he tries the door-handles and looks out of the windows, raps on the walls and almost thinks he'll take the place. Will you be so good as to draw up a lease? Then, on the whole, he decides that the rooms are too small; he doesn't think he can live on the third floor; he must look out for a piano nobile. And he goes away after having got a month's lodging in the poor little apartment for nothing.

About the other suitor Goodwood Osmond remarks that he speaks but does not talk. Indeed he declared that he wants to talk to Goodwood⁹

it wasn't easy at first, you had to climb up an interminable steep staircase, up to the top of the tower; but when you got there you had a big view and felt a little fresh breeze.

Sometimes he produces a telling effect as in the sudden appearance of Mme Merle at the convent osmond has banished his daughter, after the departure of Lord Warburton.

The effect was strange, for Madame Mere was already present to her vision, so her appearance in the flesh was like suddenly, and rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move.

At times James resorts to mannerism in his prose *hopeless, helpless, useless* and a few paragraphs further on *imperturbable, inscrutable, impenetrable* are all stacked along each other for effect, but such mannerism are very rare, so they stick out then they appear.

What about penetrating observations? Mme Merle who was *not such a fool as to irritate people by always agreeing with them*¹⁰. Or Ralph joining in the conversation with a *cynicism so transparently ingenious as to be virtually innocent*¹¹. What does that mean? Or does it mean anything at all? Another interesting remarks he puts into the mouth of Mme Merle who had once declared her belief that

when a friendship ceases to grow it immediately begins to decline - there being no point of equilibrium between liking more and liking less. A stationary affection, in other words, was impossible - it must move one way or another.

The relationship between the two cousins is perhaps the most genuine presented in the novel. And why? How does she see him? *lean he was altogether, lean and long and loosely-jointed; an accidental cohesion of relaxed angles. Furthermore Isabel had grown fond of his ugliness; his awkwardness had become dear to her.* and

He was so charming that her sense of his being ill had hitherto had a sort of comfort in it; the state of his health had seemed not a limitation, but a kind of intellectual advantage; it absolved him from all professional and official emotions and left him the luxury of being exclusively personal.

And so it goes on. James works like a sculptor, chopping off small flaky pieces dropping

⁹ page 495 ibid

¹⁰ page 279 ibid

¹¹ page 301 ibid

to the floor, where the reader can pick them up one by one, and in the process slowly forming an idea of what is left of the stone.

Now Isabel encounters opposition, the most straightforward coming from her aunt, who does not beat around the bush, when asked by Isabel if it is his lack of money that is the drawback¹².

He has no money; he has no name; he has no importance. I value such things and I have the courage to say it: I think they're very precious. Many other people think the same, and they show it. Bt they give some other reason.

The opposition from her cousin is more subtle

To attempt to reclaim her was permissible only if the attempt should succeed. To try to persuade her of anything sordid or sinister in the man to whose deep art she had succumbed would be decently discreet only in the event of her being persuaded.

in short *he could neither assent with sincerity nor protest with hope.*

Chapter 34 is a key chapter in which Ralph confronts her cousin. Of course it takes a whole chapter and a full report would be tedious, let us be content with the following rejoinder by Isabel

What sort of person should you have liked me to marry? [...] You talk about one's soaring and sailing, but if one marries at all one touches the earth. One has human feelings and needs, one has a heart in one's bosom, and one must marry a particular individual.

She goes on to refer to his mother's disappointment of not having come to an understanding with Lord Warburton, claiming that it is the total absence in Mr Osmond of those worldly advantages that pleases her, concluding with *Mr Osmond's simply a very lonely, a very cultivated and a very honest man - he's not a prodigious proprietor.*

And how does it look from the perspective of Mr Osmond himself? First of all

He was immensely pleased with his young lady; Madame Merle had made him a present of incalculable value.

then more specifically

What could be a happier gift in a companion than a quick, fanciful mind which saved one repetitions and reflected one's thought on a polished, elegant surface? Osmond hated to see his thought reproduced literally - that made it look stale and stupid; he preferred it to be freshened in the reproductions even as 'words' by music. His egotism had never taken the crude form of desiring a dull wife; this lady's intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one - a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served dessert.

And so on. As to the accusation of being a mere fortune hunter he argues disingenuously to her

¹² page 334 *ibid.*

I won't pretend I'm sorry you're rich; I'm delighted. I delight in everything that's yours - whether it be money or virtue. Money's a horrid thing to follow, but a charming thing to meet.

How charming indeed. And why should it be more disreputable to marry a woman for her money than for her virtue. (I guess money can be appropriated but virtue not, only degraded.) Driving home his point he assures her that he had never in his life tried to earn a penny, and consequently he should be less subject to suspicion than most of the people one sees grubbing and grabbing. Very disingenuous indeed. And Isabel does not see through it, but swallows it lock, stock and barrel.

Three years later, she has to pay for her naivety. When someone pays a compliment to her husband saying he must be very clever she drily reports that he has a genius for upholstery. Osmond was in his element, as Ralph observed as to the marriage

He saw how he kept all things within limits; how he adjusted, regulated, animated their manner of life. Osmond was in his element; at last he had material to work with. He always had an eye to effect, and his effects were deeply calculated. They were produced by no vulgar means, but the motives was as vulgar as the art was great.

Ralph goes on to reflect that

Osmond lived exclusively for the world. Far from being its master as he pretended to be, he was its very humble servant, and the degree of its attention was his only measure of success. [...] Everything he did was pose - pose so subtly considered so if one were not on the lookout one mistook it for impulse. [...] His tastes, his studies, his accomplishments, his collections, were all for a purpose.

Then concluding

His ambition was not to please the world, but to please himself by exciting the world's curiosity and then declining to satisfy it. It had made him feel great, ever to play the world a trick.

We conclude that the greatest trick he had played was marrying Isabel. Note that those reflections, getting to the core of an individual, are not those of an omniscient narrator, James is too clever for that, but the speculations of another character in the novel. Thus James can both have the cake and eat it. If pressed, he can absolve responsibility, and argue that those speculations say more about Ralph than Osmond. But of course they are not meant to, they are meant to be the truth. But to claim so would certainly be crude, and James recoils from crudity, just like his character Osmond. Many critics have professed to discern in the portrait of Osmond a self-portrait. Not an accurate one, of course, but a distorted, the kind of portrait you behold in curved mirror, grossly exaggerating one aspect at the expense of others. As an author and as a disinterested observer of the human condition, coldly manipulating them for the pure intellectual pleasure it affords him, he puts himself close to the position of Osmond. As noted earlier, egotism is a rewarding emotion to depict, because readers will inevitably, if not always with pleasure, not fail to identify and hence to recognize it. But James is not consistent, from time to time, if rarely,

he cannot resist the temptation to take advantage of the superior perspective afforded the author, represented in the realm of the novel, by the narrator, remarking after Ralph's extended interior soliloquy

The reader already knows more about him [meaning Osmond] than Isabel was ever to know, and the reader may therefore be given the key to the mystery. What kept Ralph alive was simply the fact that he had not yet seen enough of the person in the world in whom he was most interested; he was not yet satisfied. There was more to come; he could not make up his mind to lose that.

Then James makes this more explicit

He wanted to see what she would make of her husband - or what her husband would make of her. This was only the first act of the drama, and he were determined to sit out the performance.

Why is the interest that Ralph takes in his cousin superior to that Osmond takes in his wife? Do we not have the same aloofness of observation, reducing a human being to a thing whose antics are amusing? I guess James wants us to understand that while the interest of Osmond is cold and egotistical, that of Ralph is just a cover for a more genuine feeling of warmth and real caring. A feeling that even Ralph holds hidden to himself, because to acknowledge it would be far too painful.

We have referred to earlier the blindness of Isabel in relation to the hidden relationship between her husband and her friend Mme Merle. A crucial scene, whose significance may not have been apparent to her at the time, but which in retrospect could not have escaped her. Isabel is arriving home

What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting, while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her. Then she perceived that they had arrived at a desultory pause in their exchange of ideas and were musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them. There was nothing to shock in this; they were old friends in fact. But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light.

And it is all over, yet she has a feeling of detection, but without really knowing what. This is typical of James. Not the dramatic revelation, that would be crude and vulgar, but those effervescent secondary phenomena, that play such a subtle but yet decisive parts of our lives. How do we find out that we are no longer in love? Those early intimations of such a state of an affair are never clearcut and decisive by themselves, but they change our perceptions and throw another light by which to judge them. Setting in motion a tiny snowball rolling down a slope getting bigger and bigger, until there is no longer any possibility to deny facts. But what happens if such initial perceptions do not get properly in motion gathering substance? Then we simply forget about them. What in the past has no consequence for the present tends to be condemned to oblivion. Our interpretation of the past is colored very much by our present.

Further on, when she has been charged with the mission to make her former suitor Lord Warburton a husband to Pansy, she simply reflects

She knew of no wrong he had done; he was not violent, he was not cruel; she simply believed he hated her. That was all she accused him of, and the miserable part of it was precisely that it was not a crime, for against a crime she might have found redress.

What was she feeling? That Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one. In other words her world was shrinking, and she who had once delighted in its expansion. A few pages later on she asks herself whether she had married on a factitious theory, in order to do something finely appreciable with her money, but concluding that this could at most be half the story. And why did he want to marry her? The explanations that the reader has already become privy to, now start to dawn on Isabel herself. Why did he hate her? Because she had a mind of her own. He did not wish her to be stupid, on the contrary it was her cleverness which pleased him, but he only wanted her cleverness to suit his purposes, not hers. When this failed to happen, how could he have any other option than to hate her? Nothing was no longer a pleasure to her, and she began to realize that her cousin had been right all along. But of course she did not want to let him know that he had been right, such knowledge of her unhappiness would only pain him, and that pain she resolved to spare him. This lengthy chapter 42, the novelist considered the finest one in the whole book, and one that could not have been conveyed on the stage (nor, although this were of no concern at the time of James, in a film). What clearly fascinates James is to depict those moments in life, almost exclusively in the stillness of a night, when you are alone with your thoughts, and direct them gently but ruthlessly to the state of your own life. Moments of clarification, sad but still almost exhilarating. One may easily suspect that the whole point of the novel is simply to provide the background for setting up such an interior scene. For the reader to really get engaged in the scene, to feel for the person and engage in her fate, he or she must have struggled through many a hundred pages.

The ostensible climax of the book is the scenes at the death-bed of Ralph. Then she will decide to bar nothing. Not to spare him the pain of knowing her unhappiness, because as he will say, pain goes away, but love stays. Something that by itself sounds rather inane and trite, and thus needs a proper context to move you. In fact only if you are moved by that sentiment, can you say that the reading of the novel was a success. When Isabel arrives she almost envies Ralph's dying,

for if one were thinking of rest that was the most perfect of all. To cease utterly, to give it all up and not to know anything more - this idea was as sweet as the vision of a cool bath in a marble tank, in a darkened chamber, in a hot land.

And as to rest, Ralph responds when asked to husband his strength

What does it matter if I'm tired when I have an eternity to rest? There's no harm in making an effort when it's the very last of all. Don't people always feel better just before the end?

Yes, very much true. And then the punchline

There's nothing making us feel so much alive as to see others die.

But does it work on Isabel? She once again after the death of her cousin rejects her two earlier unsuccessful suitors, only to return to Italy and Osmond? As readers we do not

know, we can only speculate, and James, the author, does not need to commit himself.

So finally what about scenic adaptations? The novels of James are really extended theatre plays, because the emphasis is on conversation. James himself was skeptical about the feasibility, after all a theatrical version of the novel would be quite a reduction to the bare dramatical feature, and the novel, supposedly contains so much more. With the advent of TV a new kind of serialization became possible and back in 1968 a mini-series was produced by the BBC. It is not impossible that I saw it back then, although I have no definite memories of it. But it could account for the fact that the title became so familiar to me. A 1996 movie was made, and which I just watched after the reading of the novel. It makes for an interesting comparison.

First as noted, the visual deficiencies of a James can easily be remedied on the screen. Here we see the figures alive with faces, and more significantly the scenes where it all takes place become much more tangible. That is true, but of course, to put faces on imagined people is not only to restrict the imagination, would you see the film before the novel, but to conflict with it, would the film antedate. The image of Lord Warburton does not mesh at all with what I had imagined, it is much more in accordance with the sickly gentleness of a Ralph Touchett. On the other hand John Malkovich performance of Osmond very much agrees with the image already formed in my mind¹³. Ralph Touchett on the other hand is played by a character that makes you think of Robert Louis Stevenson, another irrelevant distraction. Nicole Kidman as the eponymous heroine is there to assure some kind of box-office success. What takes you several days to read is over in an hour and two. Much is of course to be struck out and only the bones of the plot remains. This on the other hand makes the plot come out more clearly than in the book, and also makes Isabels betrayal of her husband as to the court by Lord Warburton to her step-daughter easier to pinpoint. It is clear to her, as well as to him that the real reason for his pursuit is to be close to her. Once this is acknowledged, however, subtly there is no alternative for the suitor but to withhold his letter of request. There was no need for her to actually physically intercept it as Osmond accuses her of in the movie (but did he actually do that in the book, it is so hard to remember). In this respect Mme Merle is more perceptive. Otherwise it is noteworthy what pieces of conversation survives into the book. Some of the crucial lines referred to above do in fact.

What in fact do you lose from watching the film version rather than reading the book? (In fact in what sense does a film-version differ from a 'comics-version', such things are in effect done to the classics, much to the horror of the educated. After all the skeleton of a movie is made out of story-boards.) You learn about the plot, and you may be moved by the fate, far quicker than painfully reading all the printed pages. In fact enough to be able to talk knowledgeably, if not penetratingly, about the book. Seeing the movie with the book in such fresh memory is of course also a special experience, distracting in the sense, as it highlights the problems and challenges of making a film version, which is a kind of performance given the book as a script.

James crafts his novel with extreme care. Thus they are delightful to analyze when

¹³ If I did see the BBC adaptation, which is very likely, my perception of my reading may very well have been subconsciously affected

once read. But he is no page-turner, the reading is almost as much of a chore as the writing, to some extent, must have been.

December 28-30, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se