AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH NOVEL

VOLUME II
HENRY JAMES TO 1950

Arnold Kettle
Professor of Literature at the Open University, Milton Keynes

HUTCHINSON OF LONDON

By the same author

An Introduction to the English Novel
VOLUME I: TO GEORGE ELIOT

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH NOVEL

VOLUME II
HENRY JAMES TO 1950

Arnold Kettle
Professor of Literature at the Open University, Milton Keynes

HUTCHINSON OF LONDON

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH NOVEL

VOLUME II

English Literature

Editor

PROFESSOR JOHN LAWLOR
MA

Professor of English Language and Literature in the University of Keele

HUTCHINSON & CO (Publishers) LTD
3 Fitzroy Square, London W1

London Melbourne Sydney Auckland
Wellington Johannesburg and agencies
throughout the world

First published 1953
Reprinted 1955, 1957, 1959,
1961, 1962, 1965
Second edition 1967
Reprinted 1969, 1972, 1974, 1976 and 1978

Printed in Great Britain by litho by The Anchor Press Ltd,
and bound by Wm. Brendon & Son Ltd,
both of Tiptree, Essex

ISBN 0 09 048543 2 (cased)
ISBN 0 09 048544 0 (paper)

CONTENTS

Preface 7

PART I: THE LAST VICTORIANS

1 Introduction 11
2 Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady* 14
3 Samuel Butler: *The Way of All Flesh* 33
4 Thomas Hardy: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* 45

PART II: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY—
THE FIRST QUARTER

1 Introduction 59
2 Joseph Conrad: *Nostromo* 62
3 Mr Bennett and Mrs Woolf 75
Arnold Bennett: *The Old Wives' Tale* 77
H. G. Wells: *Tono-Bungay* 82
John Galsworthy: *The Man of Property* 87
Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse* 91
4 D. H. Lawrence: *The Rainbow* 100
5 James Joyce: Ulysses 121
6 E. M. Forster: *A Passage to India* 136

PART III: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY—
THE SECOND QUARTER

Introduction 149
Aldous Huxley: *Point Counter Point* 150
Graham Greene: *The Heart of the Matter* 153
Joyce Cary: *Mister Johnson* 159
Ivy Compton-Burnett: *A Family and a Fortune* 165
Henry Green: *Party Going* 171

Notes and References 179
Reading List 185
Index 189

PREFACE

As in the first volume of this little work, I have eschewed comprehensiveness in favour of concentration on a few specific books. My object has been to build a discussion of the development of the modern English novel around the study of a dozen or so novels which have, in their different ways, a more than casual significance. One of the problems of the student of the novel, whether he is the individual 'reader for pleasure' or the member of some kind of educational group, is that novels are often rather long and the discussion of them vaguer than it need be. By concentrating on a few books I have hoped to provide a manageable syllabus for, say, a year or so's reading. Books of criticism which are not read in conjunction with the work they are discussing nearly always do more harm than good.

In venturing to write about contemporary and near-contemporary literature one is obviously laying oneself open to all kinds of difficulties. I make no claim whatever to have given each of the novels I have discussed its correct proportion of space or its ultimate evaluation, though naturally I have tried to concentrate on what seems to me most worth while. I have no doubt at all that I have missed out completely a number of books and writers more worthy of consideration than some I have touched on. Nor do I doubt that some of my judgements will look silly even to myself should I live another forty years.

I should like once again to thank the friends who in advice and conversation have given me help, and to express my gratitude to the following individuals and publishing houses for their permission to make numerous quotations:

John Farquharson, on behalf of the estate of the late Henry James (for passages from *The Portrait of a Lady*); Messrs Macmillan & Co (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*); The Hogarth Press Ltd (quotations from Virginia Woolf's works and *Party Going*); Mrs Frieda Lawrence; Messrs Edward Arnold & Co (*A Passage to India*); Mr Graham Greene; Miss Ivy Compton-Burnett and Messrs Eyre & Spottiswoode (*A Family and a Fortune*); Mr Joyce Cary and Messrs Michael Joseph (*Mister Johnson*); and Mr Henry Green.

1953

A.K.

PART I

The Last Victorians

I

INTRODUCTION

The end of one epoch is the beginning of another. The three novels with the examination of which this volume opens do not look backwards. Each of these writers—Henry James, Butler, Hardy—is very much of his time; but if one calls them the last Victorians it is not to indicate a mere obstinate clinging to a passing world. There is more than a whiff of the future in their work.

The late Victorian period marks the beginning of the disintegration of the epoch ushered in a century before by the Industrial Revolution, the epoch in which Britain became the workshop and the banker of the world. After about 1870 the apparently secure foundations of the world of the London and Manchester business men began to be shaken. It was not until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 that the full horror became clear, but by then for nearly half a century the process of disintegration had been going on. The late Victorian period may still seem to us superficially, as we look back on it, an era of stability, of the respectable elderly queen, of stuffy clothes and heavy architecture, of comfortable middle-class incomes from the Stock Exchange, of the English Sunday and the gradual extension of the franchise and of free education. But it was also an era of desperation—of a hectic and bloody imperial race against new upstart competitors, of the first modern economic slump, of the rise of the Labour movement as we know it, of the dock strike and Bloody Sunday, of the impact of Darwin and T. H. Huxley, of William Morris and Bernard Shaw (to say nothing of Ibsen and Tolstoy and Marx), of the aesthetes and the *Yellow Book*, of Charles Bradlaugh and Beatrice Webb.

In Samuel Butler and Thomas Hardy it is quite clearly the latter aspect of the age—the opposite of stability—that we find most strikingly expressed. They are, even to a casual glance, novelists of the disintegration, rebels and critics, crying out (sometimes, it seems to the sophisticated middle-class reader, a bit too shrilly) against the sanctities and ethics of the Victorian bourgeois world. Butler is very much a part of that world and this fact, as we shall see, has its effect on his writing. Hardy, the countryman, soaked in the older, pre-capitalist culture of peasant Wessex, is less involved in the values he is attacking and achieves in his two final novels, *Tess* and *Jude*, tragedy which—for all the limitations we shall have to examine—bitterly and poignantly captures a central truth of the era in which he lived.

Henry James is perhaps less obviously a novelist of the disintegration. The social aura that surrounds both the man and his work is that of the well-to-do Victorian middle class, leisured, well-fed, moving securely if not always elegantly through a scene cluttered up with bric-à-brac and *objets d'art*. But to see James merely as the rather snobbish sharer in such a world is to emphasise what is least important in a great novelist. James, it is true, was a bourgeois writer, the bourgeois novelist, one might say, at his most exquisite, most refined point. But his work, like that of Balzac—with whom he has more in common than a hasty estimate might allow—subtly transcends in much of its effect the ideas and the values which appear to infect it at its roots. There *is*, as we shall see, something wrong at the very heart of James the novelist. Yet this does not permit us to undervalue him. No novelist has explored with quite so fine, nor quite so disciplined an art the ramifications of the complex consciousness of latter-day bourgeois man. To read James uncritically or exclusively is, of course, fatal; but to read him with the kind of insight he deserves is to penetrate deep into the spiritual situation involved in the disintegration of the bourgeois world.

That James himself was at an obscure and impressive level of experience aware of this disintegration is revealed by implication in the remarkable novel *The Princess Casamassima* and then clearly as in a flash in the letter he wrote* at that most symbolic of moments —the outbreak of the First World War. In the last two years of his life he drew back from the exploration of this vision; but that he had had a glimpse of it is a measure of the quality of his perception.

These novelists of the late Victorian age are not technically, any more than socially, revolutionaries; but each of them had something new to say and therefore had to discover new means of expression, new ways of modifying or transforming existing techniques to meet new needs. With Butler and Hardy technical preoccupation is on a far lower level than with James. They are content, essentially, to stretch old forms a little in order to receive a new content. Butler, typically, looks back to the eighteenth century; he gets rid of the Dickensian plot along with the Dickensian poetry and other 'literary garbage'. His analytical method, his consistent object of debunking humbug and pretension, together with his rather limited positive sense of human development, lead him to employ for his novel what is fundamentally the technique of *Joseph Andrews* or *Vanity Fair*, though his range is narrower, his control a good deal tighter and his view of life more incisive than is the case with either Fielding or Thackeray.

Hardy, for his part, uses and only slightly modifies the conventional nineteenth-century novel structure. His work is in the tradition of the English moral fable—of *Hard Times* and *North and South* and *Silas Marner*.

James is, in a far more striking degree, an innovator. His aim, as we shall see, is the exploration, in terms more subtle than any before attempted, of the furthest reaches of the refined consciousness. Hence his immense interest in presentation, his peculiar development of prose style (the inability in his last novels ever to resist that last, even more finely modulated qualification) and also his link with the immediate future development of the novel.

It is James rather than Butler and Hardy—for all their self-conscious modernity of theme and outlook—who is the principal signpost towards what we have come to think of as the characteristically 'modern' experiments of the early twentieth-century novel, towards—different as they are—Proust and Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Whether we are to regard this historical position as a strengthening of James's claims to greatness will depend, of course, on whether we finally assess the trend of which his work is a part as a healthy and hopeful one or rather as a dead end, a withered branch,* of the main developing tradition of English fiction. It is one of the purposes of this little book to discuss this very question.

* Quoted Vol. I, p. 85.

* See D. S. Savage: *The Withered Branch, Six Studies in the Modern Novel* (1950).

2

HENRY JAMES: THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

(1880–81)

Compared with this the English novels which precede it, except perhaps those of Jane Austen, all seem a trifle crude. There is a habit of perfection here, a certainty and a poise, which is quite different from the merits and power of *Oliver Twist* or *Wuthering Heights* or even *Middlemarch*. The quality has something to do with the full consciousness of Henry James's art. Nothing in *The Portrait of a Lady* is unconscious, nothing there by chance, no ungathered wayward strands, no clumsiness. No novelist is so absorbed as James in what he himself might call his 'game'. But it is not an empty or superficial concern with 'form' that gives *The Portrait of a Lady* its quality. James's manner, his obsession with style, his intricate and passionate concern with presentation, do not spring from a narrow 'aesthetic' attitude to his art.

> James had in his style and perhaps in the life which it reflected an idiosyncrasy so powerful, so overwhelming, that to many it seemed a stultifying vice, or at least an inexcusable heresy. . . . He enjoyed an excess of intelligence and he suffered, both in life and art, from an excessive effort to communicate it, to represent it in all its fullness. His style grew elaborate in the degree that he rendered shades and refinements of meaning and feeling not usually rendered at all. . . . His intention and all his labour was to represent dramatically intelligence at its most difficult, its most lucid, its most beautiful point. This is the sum of his idiosyncrasy.[1]

The Portrait of a Lady is not one of James's 'difficult' novels; but

[1] Superior figures refer to Notes and References, pp. 179–183.

Mr Blackmur's remarks usefully remind us of the inadequacy of a merely formal approach to James's work. The extraordinary richness of texture of his novels makes such an approach tempting; but it will take us neither to James's triumphs nor to his failures.

The beauty of texture derives immediately from two qualities, which are ultimately inseparable. One is James's ability to make us know his characters more richly, though not necessarily more vividly, than we know the characters of other novelists; the other is the subtlety of his own standpoint. Without the latter quality the former would not, of course, be possible. You cannot control the responses of your reader unless you are in complete control of your material.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* there are—looking at the question from an analytical point of view—two kinds of characters: those whom we know from straightforward, though not unsubtle, description by the author and those who reveal themselves in the course of the book. The latter are, obviously, the important ones. The former—Mrs Touchett, Henrietta Stackpole, the Countess Gemini, Pansy Osmond—are interesting primarily in their relationship to the chief characters, in their part in the pattern; we do not follow their existence out of their function in the book. But they are nevertheless not 'flat' characters. They come alive not as 'characters', not as personified 'humours', but as complete people (Pansy, perhaps, is the exception, but then is it not the intention that we should see her as scarcely an independent being at all?) and if we do not follow them out of the part of the plot which concerns them it is because our interests are more involved elsewhere, not because they do not have a full existence of their own.

The way Henry James introduces his characters to us depends entirely on the kind of function they are to have in his story. The main characters are never described as they *are* (i.e. as the author knows them to be) but—by and large—as Isabel Archer sees them. We know them at first only by the first impression that they make. We get to know better what they are like in the way that, in life, we get to know people better through acquaintance. And just as in life we are seldom, if ever, quite certain what another person is like, so in a Henry James novel we are often pretty much at sea about particular characters for considerable portions of the book. In *The Portrait of a Lady* the person whom at first we inevitably know least about is Madame Merle. Henry James lets us know right from the start that there is something sinister about her; we are made quickly to feel that Isabel's reaction to her is less than adequate,

but the precise nature of her character is not revealed until fairly far into the book.

It is not quite true to say that everything in *The Portrait of a Lady* is revealed through Isabel's consciousness. We know, from the start, certain things that Isabel does not know. We know, for instance—and twice Henry James explicitly reminds us of it—more about Ralph Touchett's feeling for Isabel than she herself perceives.

Indeed, there is a sense in which the novel is revealed to us through Ralph's consciousness, for his is the 'finest', the fullest intelligence in the book and therefore he sees things—about Madame Merle, about Osmond, about Isabel herself—which Isabel does not see and inevitably such perceptions are transmitted to the reader. Again, we are offered important scenes—between Madame Merle and Osmond, between the Countess and Madame Merle—which reveal to us not the whole truth but enough of the truth about Madame Merle's stratagems to put us at an advantage over Isabel.

The truth is that Henry James's purpose in this novel is not to put Isabel between the reader and the situation (in the way that Strether's consciousness is used in *The Ambassadors*) but to reveal to the reader the full implications of Isabel's consciousness. For this to happen we must see Isabel not merely from the inside (i.e. know how she feels) but from the outside too. The method is, in fact, precisely the method of *Emma*, except that Jane Austen is rather more scrupulously consistent than Henry James. The scenes 'outside' Emma herself (like Jane Fairfax's visits to the post office) are brought to our knowledge by being related by a third party in the presence of Emma herself. Our only 'advantage' over Emma herself is provided by the words which Jane Austen uses to describe her. Henry James, as we have seen, takes greater liberties. Yet it is worth observing that the great scene at the centre of *The Portrait of a Lady* (ch. XIII), in which Isabel takes stock of her situation, is of precisely the same *kind* as the scene in which (Vol. I, ch. XVI) Emma takes stock of her dealings with Harriet.

Since James's purpose is to render the full implications of Isabel's situation it is necessary that we should know more than Isabel, should see her, that is to say, from the outside. The question remains how *much* more should we know? And James's answer is: just as much as is necessary for a fully sympathetic understanding. Thus we are to know that Madame Merle has drawn Isabel into a trap, but we are not to know why. The full story is kept back, not because Henry James is interested in suspense in the melodramatic sense, but because if we were in on the secret the nature of Isabel's discovery

of her situation could not be so effectively revealed. It is necessary to the novel that we should *share* Isabel's suspicions and her awakening. In order to give the precise weight (not just the logical weight but the intricate weight of feelings, standards, loyalties) to the issues involved in her final dilemma we must know not just what has happened to Isabel but the way it has happened.

It is from such a consideration that there will emerge one of Henry James's cardinal contributions to the art of the novel. With James the question 'What happened?' carries the most subtle, the most exciting ramifications. To no previous novelist had the answer to such a question seemed so difficult, its implications so interminable. To a George Eliot the question is complicated enough: to understand what happened to Lydgate we must be made aware of innumerable issues, facets of character, moral choices, social pressures. And yet deep in George Eliot's novel is implicit the idea that if the reader only knows enough facts about the situation he will know the situation. It is the aim of Henry James to avoid the 'about' or, at least, to alter its status, to transform quantity into quality. His is the poet's ambition: to create an object about which we say not 'It means. . . .' but 'It is. . . .' (In this he is with Emily Brontë.) We cannot *understand* Isabel Archer, he implies, unless we feel as she feels. And it is, indeed, because he succeeds in this attempt that *The Portrait of a Lady* though not a greater novel than *Middlemarch* is a more moving one.

As a rule when Henry James describes a character (as opposed to allowing the person to be revealed in action) the description is of the kind we have noticed in *Emma* or *Middlemarch*.

Mrs Touchett was certainly a person of many oddities, of which her behaviour on returning to her husband's house after many months was a noticeable specimen. She had her own way of doing all that she did, and this is the simplest description of a character which, although by no means without liberal motions, rarely succeeded in giving an impression of suavity. Mrs Touchett might do a great deal of good, but she never pleased. This way of her own, of which she was so fond, was not intrinsically offensive—it was just unmistakeably distinguished from the way of others. The edges of her conduct were so very clear-cut that for susceptible persons it sometimes had a knife-like effect. That hard fineness came out in her deportment during the first hours of her return from America, under circumstances in which it might have seemed that her first act would have been to exchange greetings with her husband and son. Mrs Touchett, for reasons which she deemed excellent, always retired on such occasions into impenetrable seclusion, postponing the

more sentimental ceremony until she had repaired the disorder of dress with a completeness which had the less reason to be of high importance as neither beauty nor vanity were concerned in it. She was a plain-faced old woman, without graces and without any great elegance, but with an extreme respect for her own motives. She was usually prepared to explain these—when the explanation was asked as a favour; and in such a case they proved totally different from those that had been attributed to her. She was virtually separated from her husband, but she appeared to perceive nothing irregular in the situation. It had become clear, at an early stage of their community, that they should never desire the same thing at the same moment, and this appearance had prompted her to rescue disagreement from the vulgar realm of accident. She did what she could to erect it into a law—a much more edifying aspect of it—by going to live in Florence, where she bought a house and established herself; and by leaving her husband to take care of the English branch of his bank. This arrangement greatly pleased her; it was so felicitously definite. It struck her husband in the same light, in a foggy square in London, where it was at times the most definite fact he discerned; but he would have preferred that such unnatural things should have a greater vagueness. To agree to disagree had cost him an effort; he was ready to agree to almost anything but that, and saw no reason why either assent or dissent should be so terribly consistent.

Mrs Touchett indulged in no regrets nor speculations, and usually came once a year to spend a month with her husband, a period during which she apparently took pains to convince him that she had adopted the right system. She was not fond of the English style of life, and had three or four reasons for it to which she currently alluded; they bore upon minor points of that ancient order, but for Mrs Touchett they amply justified non-residence. She detested bread-sauce, which, as she said, looked like a poultice and tasted like soap; she objected to the consumption of beer by her maid-servants; and she affirmed that the British laundress (Mrs Touchett was very particular about the appearance of her linen) was not a mistress of her art.[2]

Here the description depends for its effect entirely on the quality of the author's wit, his organised intellectual comment, and the wit is of the sort (a penetrating delicacy of observation within an accepted social group) achieved by Jane Austen or George Eliot.

But some of the described characters in *The Portrait of a Lady* come poetically to life. This is the description of Isabel's first meeting with the Countess Gemini.

The Countess Gemini simply nodded without getting up; 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 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 the 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 so much manner, immediately classed her as the most affected of women. She remembered that Ralph had not recommended her as an acquaintance; but she was ready to acknowledge that to a casual view the Countess Gemini revealed no depths. Her demonstrations suggested the violent wavings of some flag of general truce—white silk with fluttering streamers.[3]

We are never to get to know the Countess very well, but already we see her with a peculiar vividness, the vividness evoked by poetic imagery. The bird image has a visual force so intense that it goes beyond surface illumination—'bristling with elegance' in its context contains a world of comment as well as vividness. So does the image of the flag of truce.

Henry James's predominant interest is, however, by no means in character. *The Portrait of a Lady*, he tells us in his Preface, has as its corner-stone 'the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny'. The interest, it is already indicated, is not primarily a psychological one, not a matter of mere personal analysis. And *The Portrait of a Lady* is indeed a novel of the widest scope and relevance. Though it is in the line of Jane Austen it has a quality which it is not misleading to call symbolic (already we have hinted at a link with what would appear at first to be a wholly different novel, *Wuthering Heights*). *The Portrait of a Lady* is a novel about destiny. Or, to use a concept rather more in tone with the language of the book itself, it is a novel about freedom. It would not be outrageous, though it might be misleading, to call it a nineteenth-century *Paradise Lost*.

Henry James is, of course, far too sophisticated an artist to offer us the 'subject' of his book on a platter. In his moral interest he avoids like the plague anything approaching the abstract.

I might envy [he writes in his Preface], though I couldn't emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable first and to make out its agents afterwards: I could think so little of any fable that didn't need its agents positively to launch it; I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it.

And again, a little later:

> There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it.*

James's novel is not a moral fable; but its moral interest is nevertheless central. Only the business of 'launching', of presenting with all the necessary depth of 'felt life', that 'ado' which is the story of Isabel Archer, all this may easily distract our attention from the central theme. Indeed there was a time when James's novels apparently were regarded as 'comedies of manners' (cf. Trollope) and even so superbly intelligent a reader as E. M. Forster seems to have missed the point of them almost completely.

The launching of *The Portrait of a Lady* is beautifully done. Gardencourt, the house in Albany, upper-class London: they are called up with magnificent certainty and solidity. So too are the people of the book: the Touchetts, Caspar Goodwood, Henrietta Stackpole, Lord Warburton, Isabel herself. If these characters are to contribute to a central pattern it will not be, it is clear, in the manner of anything approaching allegory. They are all too 'round', too 'free', to be felt, for even a moment, simply to be 'standing for' anything. It is one of Henry James's achievements that he can convince us that his characters have a life outside the pages of his novel without ever leading us into the temptation of following them beyond his purpose. It is because everything in these early chapters of *The Portrait of a Lady* is realised with such fullness, such apparent lack of pointed emphasis, that we are slow to recognise the basic pattern of the novel, but it is also on this account that our imagination is so firmly engaged.

Before the end of the first chapter, however, a subsidiary theme has already been fairly fully stated and three of the main themes announced or, at any rate, indicated. The subsidiary theme is that generally referred to in Henry James's novels as the international situation—the relation of America to Europe. Graham Greene in a recent introduction to *The Portrait of a Lady* has tried to play down the importance of this theme. 'It is true the innocent figure is nearly always American (Roderick Hudson, Newman, Isabel and

* I quote with some uneasiness from James's Preface (written, it will be recalled, some quarter of a century after the novel), not because I doubt the relevance or interest of his observations but because I am conscious of the difficulty of assimilating out of context sentences written in his most idiosyncratic, complex style.

Milly, Maggie Verver and her father), but the corrupted characters . . . are also American: Mme Merle, Gilbert Osmond, Kate Croy, Merton Densher, Charlotte Stant. His characters are mainly American, simply because James himself was American.'[4] In fact, of course, neither Kate Croy nor Densher is an American and one of the points about the other 'corrupted' characters is that they are all expatriates, europeanised Americans, whom it is at least possible to see as corrupted by Europe.* The theme of the impact of European civilisation on Americans—innocent or not—is not a main theme of *The Portrait of a Lady* but it is nevertheless there and we shall return to it later. And it is broached in the very first pages of the novel in the description of the Touchett *ménage* and in such details as the failure of Mr Touchett to understand (or rather, his pretence at not understanding) Lord Warburton's jokes

The main themes indicated in the first chapters are the importance of wealth, the difficulty of marriage and—fundamental to the other two—the problem of freedom or independence. In each case the theme appears to be merely a casual subject of conversation but in fact there is nothing casual there. The vital theme of freedom is introduced in the form of a joke—one of Mrs Touchett's eccentric telegrams: ' "Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent".' The telegram is discussed by Mr Touchett and Ralph.

> 'There's one thing very clear in it,' said the old man; 'she has given the hotel-clerk a dressing.'
>
> 'I'm not sure even of that, since he has driven her from the field. We thought at first that the sister mentioned might be the sister of the clerk; but the subsequent mention of a niece seems to prove that the allusion is to one of my aunts. Then there was a question as to whose the two other sisters were; they are probably two of my late aunt's daughters. But who's "quite independent", and in what sense is the term used?—that point's not yet settled. Does the expression apply more particularly to the young lady my mother has adopted, or does it characterise her sisters equally?—and is it used in a moral or in a financial sense? Does it mean that they've been left well off, or that they wish to be under no obligations?—or does it simply mean that they're fond of their own way?'[5]

* For a fuller discussion of this problem see *Henry James, the Major Phase* by F. O. Matthiessen and *Maule's Curse* by Yvor Winters.

Ralph's frivolous speculations do in fact state the basic problems to be dealt with in the novel. The point is indeed not yet settled: it will take the whole book to settle it. And, even then, 'settle' is not the right word. One does not, Henry James would be quick to remind us, settle life.

The independence of Isabel is the quality about her most often emphasised. Mrs Touchett has taken her up, but she is not, she assures Ralph 'a candidate for adoption'. ' "I'm very fond of my liberty",'[6] she adds. From the very first the ambiguous quality of this independence is stressed. Isabel is attractive, interesting, 'fine' ('she carried within her a great fund of life, and her deepest enjoyment was to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world'[7]); but she is also in many respects inexperienced, naïve. ' "It occurred to me," Mrs Touchett says, "that it would be a kindness to take her about and introduce her to the world. She thinks she knows a great deal of it—like most American girls; but like most American girls she's ridiculously mistaken".'[8] Henry James does not allow us, charming creature as she is, to idealise Isabel:

> Altogether, with her meagre knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better, her determination to see, to try, to know, her combination of the delicate desultory flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions: she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism: if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant.[9]

The Portrait of a Lady is the revelation of the inadequacy of Isabel's view to freedom.

The revelation is so full, so concrete, that to abstract from it the main, insistent theme must inevitably weaken the impression of the book. But analysis involves such abstraction and we shall not respond fully to James's novel unless we are conscious of its theme. The theme in its earlier stages is fully expressed in the scene in which Caspar Goodwood for the second time asks Isabel to marry him (she has just refused Lord Warburton).

> 'I don't know,' she answered rather grandly. 'The world—with all these places so arranged and so touching each other—comes to strike one as rather small.'

> 'It's a sight too big for me!' Caspar exclaimed with a simplicity our young lady might have found touching if her face had not been set against concessions.
>
> This attitude was part of a system, a theory, that she had lately embraced, and to be thorough she said after a moment: 'Don't think me unkind if I say it's just that—being out of your sight—that I like. If you were in the same place I should feel you were watching me, and I don't like that—I like my liberty too much. If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of,' she went on with a slight recurrence of grandeur, 'it's my personal independence.' But whatever there might be of the too superior in this speech moved Caspar Goodwood's admiration; there was nothing he winced at in the large air of it. He had never supposed she hadn't wings and the need of beautiful free movements—he wasn't, with his own long arms and strides, afraid of any force in her. Isabel's words, if they had been meant to shock him, failed of the mark and only made him smile with the sense that here was common ground. 'Who would wish less to curtail your liberty than I? What can give me greater pleasure than to see you perfectly independent—doing whatever you like? It's to make you independent that I want to marry you.'
>
> 'That's a beautiful sophism,' said the girl with a smile more beautiful still.
>
> 'An unmarried woman—a girl of your age—isn't independent. There are all sorts of things she can't do. She's hampered at every step.'
>
> 'That's as she looks at the question,' Isabel answered with much spirit. 'I'm not in my first youth—I can do what I choose—I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of a serious disposition; I'm not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed I can't afford such luxuries. Besides, I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honourable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me.' She paused a moment, but not long enough for her companion to reply. He was apparently on the point of doing so when she went on: 'Let me say this to you, Mr Goodwood. You're so kind as to speak of being afraid of my marrying. If you should hear a rumour that I'm on the point of doing so—girls are liable to have such things said about them—remember what I have told you about my love of liberty and venture to doubt it.'[10]

The Portrait of a Lady is far from allegory yet one is permitted to feel, in the symbolic quality of the novel, that the characters, though unmistakably individuals, are more than individuals. Thus, in her rejection of Caspar Goodwood, Isabel is rejecting America, or at least that part of America that Goodwood represents, young, strong, go-ahead, uninhibited, hard. For Goodwood (as for

Henrietta, who essentially shares his quality) the problem of freedom is simple and might be expressed in the words of Mr Archibald Macleish's American Dream:

> America is promises
> For those that take them.

Goodwood—and it would be wrong to see him as a wholly unsympathetic character—is prepared to take them with all that taking implies. To him and Henrietta (and they are, on one level, the most sensible, positive people in the book) Isabel's problem is not a problem at all. Freedom for them has the simple quality it possessed for the nineteenth-century liberal.

The rejection of Lord Warburton has, similarly, a symbolic quality—though, again, one must insist that this is not an allegory. Warburton is a liberal aristocrat. He embodies the aristocratic culture of Europe (that has so attracted Isabel at Gardencourt) and adds his own reforming ideas—a combination which Henry James, had he been the kind of aesthetic snob he is often held to be, might have found irresistible. Ralph Touchett sums up Warburton's social position magnificently:

> '. . . He says I don't understand my time, I understand it certainly better than he, who can neither abolish himself as a nuisance nor maintain himself as an institution.'[11]

Isabel's rejection of Lord Warburton is not a light one. She feels very deeply the attraction of the aristocratic standards. But she feels also the limitations of Warburton and his sisters, the Misses Molyneux (it is worth comparing them with another 'county' family—the Marchants—in the wonderful *Princess Casamassima*; Henry James's attitude to the British aristocracy is by no means uncritical).

> '. . . So long as I look at the Misses Molyneux they seem to me to answer a kind of ideal. Then Henrietta presents herself, and I'm straightway convinced by *her*; not so much in respect to herself as in respect to what masses behind her.'[12]

Ralph, too, (though he does not undervalue her) disposes of Henrietta:

> 'Henrietta . . . does smell of the Future—it almost knocks one down!'[13]

Goodwood and Warburton rejected (almost like two temptations), Isabel is now 'free' to affront her destiny. But she is not free because she is poor. She has never, we are told early on, known anything about money, and it is typical of this novel that this fine, romantic indifference to wealth should be one of the basic factors in Isabel's tragedy.

Henry James's characters always have to be rich and the reason is not the obvious one. 'I call people rich,' says Ralph Touchett, 'when they're able to meet the requirements of their imagination.'[14] It is for this reason that he persuades his father to leave Isabel a fortune. She must be rich in order to be free of the material world. She must be free in order to 'live'.

It is Ralph's one supreme mistake in intelligence and it is the mistake that ruins Isabel. For it is her wealth that arouses Madame Merle's realisation that she can use her and leads directly to the disastrous, tragic marriage with Osmond. And in the superb scene in which, sitting in the candlelight in the elegant, spiritually empty house in Rome, Isabel takes stock of her tragedy, she painfully reveals to herself the conclusion:

> But for her money, as she saw today, she would never have done it. And then her mind wandered off to poor Mr Touchett, sleeping under English turf, the beneficient author of infinite woe! For this was the fantastic fact. At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle. What would lighten her own conscience more effectually than to make it over to the man with the best taste in the world? Unless she should have given it to a hospital there would have been nothing better she could do with it; and there was no charitable institution in which she had been as much interested as in Gilbert Osmond. He would use her fortune in a way that would make her think better of it and rub off a certain grossness attaching to the good luck of an unexpected inheritance. There had been nothing very delicate in inheriting seventy thousand pounds; the delicacy had been all in Mr Touchett's leaving them to her. But to marry Gilbert Osmond and bring him such a portion—in that there would be delicacy for her as well. There would be less for him—that was true; but that was his affair, and if he loved her he wouldn't object to her being rich. Had he not had the courage to say he was glad she was rich?[15]

It is at the moment when Ralph is dying that the theme is finally stated in the form at once the most affecting and most morally profound.

She raised her head and her clasped hands; she seemed for a moment to pray for him. 'Is it true—is it true?' she asked.

'True that you've been stupid? Oh no,' said Ralph with a sensible intention of wit.

'That you made me rich—that all I have is yours?'

He turned away his head, and for some time said nothing. Then, at last: 'Ah, don't speak of that—that was not happy.' Slowly he moved his face toward her again, and they once more saw each other.

'But for that—but for that——!' And he paused. 'I believe I ruined you,' he wailed.

She was full of the sense that he was beyond the reach of pain; he seemed already so little of this world. But even if she had not had it she would still have spoken, for nothing mattered now but the only knowledge that was not pure anguish—the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together. 'He married me for the money,' she said. She wished to say everything; she was afraid he might die before she had done so.

He gazed at her a little, and for the first time his fixed eyes lowered their lids. But he raised them in a moment, and then, 'He was greatly in love with you,' he answered.

'Yes, he was in love with me. But he wouldn't have married me if I had been poor. I don't hurt you in saying that. How can I? I only want you to understand. I always tried to keep you from understanding; but that's all over.'

'I always understood,' said Ralph.

'I thought you did, and I didn't like it. But now I like it.'

'You don't hurt me—you make me very happy.' And as Ralph said this there was an extraordinary gladness in his voice. She bent her head again, and pressed her lips to the back of his hand. 'I always understood,' he continued, 'though it was so strange—so pitiful. You wanted to look at life for yourself—but you were not allowed; you were punished for your wish. You were ground in the very mill of the conventional!'

'Oh yes, I've been punished,' Isabel sobbed.[16]

The necessity here of stating in its dreadful simplicity the agonising truth so that the relationship of the two may be purified and deepened shows an intuition the very opposite of sentimental.

Isabel, then, imagining herself free, has in fact delivered herself into bondage. And the bondage has come about not casually but out of the very force and fortune of her own aspirations to freedom. She has sought life and because she has sought it in this way she has found death.

Freedom, to Isabel and to Ralph (for he has been as much concerned in the issue as she), has been an idealised freedom. They have sought to be free not through a recognition of, but by an

escape from, necessity. And in so doing they have delivered Isabel over to an exploitation as crude and more corrupting than the exploitation that would have been her fate if Mrs Touchett had never visited Albany.

' "Do you still like Serena Merle?" ' is Mrs Touchett's last question of Isabel.

'Not as I once did. But it doesn't matter, for she's going to America.'
'To America? She must have done something very bad.'
'Yes—very bad.'
'May I ask what it is?'
'She made a convenience of me.'
'Ah,' cried Mrs Touchett, 'so she did of me! She does of everyone.'[17]

The Portrait of a Lady is one of the most profound expressions in literature of the illusion that freedom is an abstract quality inherent in the individual soul.

It is interesting to compare James's book with another great novel written not very long before, *Madame Bovary*, the story of another woman 'ground in the very mill of the conventional'. It is true that Emma Bovary is, unlike Isabel Archer, not in the least 'fine', that she fails to escape from her petty-bourgeois social *milieu* and that she is quite incapable of the exalted moral discipline to which Isabel is dedicated, yet we will learn something of James's novel, I think, from a glance at Flaubert's. What is shocking in *Madame Bovary* is the appalling passivity of Flaubert's characters, their inability to fight in any effective way the bourgeois world which Flaubert detests and which relentlessly warps and destroys all fineness in them. The strength of the novel lies in the very ruthlessness of its exposure of romantic attitudes; but therein also lies its weakness, the sense we get of something less than the human capacity for heroism, the uneasy suspicions of a *roman à thèse*. *The Portrait of a Lady* gives, as a matter of fact, no more positive response to its revelation of bourgeois values than *Madame Bovary*, yet we do experience a sense of human resilience and dignity. The interesting question is how far this sense—embodied in the 'fineness' of Isabel herself—is merely romantic and illusory.

The issue can perhaps be put in this way: is not the accumulated effect of the novel to present human destiny as inexorably one of suffering and despair? There are a number of tendencies making for this effect. In the first place there is the insistent use of dramatic irony in the construction of the book. Chapter after chapter in the

early reaches of the novel is designed to emphasise the fatality facing Isabel's aspirations. The fifth chapter tells us she has come to Europe to find happiness; the sixth that she likes unexpectedness ('I shall not have success [in Europe] if they're too stupidly conventional. I'm not in the least stupidly conventional'). The seventh chapter ends with the following exchange:

> 'I always want to know the things one shouldn't do.'
> 'So as to do them?' asked her aunt.
> 'So as to choose,' said Isabel.

The eighth draws to a close with

> 'I shall never make anyone a martyr.'
> 'You'll never be one, I hope.'
> 'I hope not. . . .'

This is all, it may be argued, simply Henry James at work, extracting from every situation its maximum of point. But the art, it seems to me, is in a subtle sense self-betraying. What is achieved is a kind of inevitability, a sense of Isabel's never standing a chance, which amounts not to objective irony but to the creation of something like an external destiny. Is not martyrdom becoming, in a sense at once insidious and—with all the associations and overtones one may care to give the word—romantic? Is there not to be here a breath—a very sophisticated and infinitely worldly breath—of the emotional and moral inadequacy involved in George Eliot's vision of those latter-day Saint Theresas?

Our final judgement must depend on the climax—the famous ending—of the book. It is from this ultimate impression that we shall have to decide whether James indeed plays fair with Isabel and us, whether he reveals in full profundity and (in the least cold sense of the word) objectivity a tragic situation or whether there is a certain sleight of hand, the putting across not of life but of something which merely for the moment passes for life. But before we consider this final climax it is worth noting what would seem an odd weakness in the novel. Is it not a little strange that of all the essential parts of Isabel's story which are revealed to us the section of her life most pointedly avoided is that immediately before her decision to marry Osmond? She has met him, got to know him somewhat; she then goes away for a year, travelling in Europe and the Middle East with Madame Merle. When she comes back to

Florence she has decided to marry Osmond. This is, from the novelist's point of view, the most difficult moment in the book. How to convince us that a young woman like Isabel would in fact marry a man like Osmond? And it is a moment which, despite the revealing conversation with Ralph (which does indeed tell us something) is, I suggest, not satisfactorily got over. And the point is that if Isabel's marriage to Osmond is in any sense a fraud perpetrated upon us for his own ends by the author, the book is greatly weakened.

At the end of the novel Isabel, after Ralph's death and another encounter with Caspar Goodwood, returns to Rome. Is her return to Osmond irrevocable, an acceptance now and for ever of her 'destiny', or is it tentative, no ending, the situation unresolved? Mr F. O. Matthiessen, arguing in the latter sense, has a most interesting observation:

> The end of Isabel's career is not yet in sight. That fact raises a critical issue about James's way of rounding off his narratives. He was keenly aware of what his method involved. As he wrote in his notebook, upon concluding his detailed project: 'With strong handling it seems to me that it may be all very true, very powerful, very touching. The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished—that it has not seen the heroine to the end of her situation—that I have left her *en l'air*. This is both true and false. The *whole* of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity—it groups together. It is complete in itself—and the rest may be taken up or not, later.'[18]

James's own evidence is of course conclusive as to his intention, but it is not necessarily relevant as to what is in fact achieved; and it seems to me that, although the ending of *The Portrait of a Lady* does not completely and irrevocably round off the story—the possibility of Isabel's later reconsidering her decision is not excluded—yet the dominant impression is undoubtedly that of the deliberate rejection of 'life' (as offered by Caspar Goodwood) in favour of death, as represented by the situation in Rome. The scene with Goodwood is indeed very remarkable with its candid, if tortured, facing of a sexual implication which James is apt to sheer off. On the whole the effect of this scene, though one understands completely the quality of Isabel's reaction, is further to weight the scales against a return to Rome. Even if Goodwood himself is impossible, the vitality that he conveys is a force to be reckoned with and Isabel's rejection of this vitality involves more

clearly than ever the sense that she is turning her face to the wall.

Isabel's return to Rome is certainly not a mere surrender to the conventional force of the marriage vow. The issue as to whether or not she should leave her husband is twice quite frankly broached by Henrietta, as well as by Goodwood. Isabel's first reply to Henrietta is significant:

> 'I don't know what great unhappiness might bring me to; but it seems to me I shall always be ashamed. One must accept one's deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate. One can't change that way,' Isabel repeated.[19]

Later, when she discovers how little free she had in fact been, it is her obligation towards Pansy that becomes the most important factor. But always there is the sense of some deep inward consideration that makes the particular issues—the character of Osmond, her own mistakes, the needs of Pansy, the importunity of Goodwood—irrelevant. The recurring image in the last pages is of a sea or torrent in which Isabel is immersed. Goodwood becomes identified with the torrent. Her temptation is to give herself up to it.* When she breaks loose from him and the image she is once more 'free', free and in darkness. The lights now are the lights of Gardencourt and now he knows where to turn. 'There was a very straight path.'[20]

It seems to me inescapable that what Isabel finally chooses is something represented by a high cold word like duty or resignation, the duty of an empty vow, the resignation of the defeated, and that in making her choice she is paying a final sacrificial tribute to her own ruined conception of freedom. For Henry James, though he sees the tragedy implicit in the Victorian ruling-class view of freedom, is himself so deeply involved in that illusion that he cannot escape from it. His books are tragedies precisely because their subject is the smashing of the bourgeois illusion of freedom in the consciousness of characters who are unable to conceive of freedom in any other way. His 'innocent' persons have therefore always the characters of victims; they are at the mercy of the vulgar and the corrupt, and the more finely conscious they become of their situation the more unable are they to cope with it in positive terms. Hence the contradiction of a Fleda Vetch† whose superior consciousness (and conscience) leads her in effect to reject life in favour of death. This is a favourite, almost an archetypal situation, in James's novels. It achieves its most striking expression in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove* in which another rich American girl meets, even more powerfully and more exquisitely, the fate of Isabel Archer.

* It is at such a moment that one sees the force of Stephen Spender's linking of James with Conrad's 'in the destructive element immerse' in an otherwise not very helpful book (*The Destructive Element*, 1937).

† In *The Spoils of Poynton*.

For James in his supreme concern for 'living' (Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, Strether in *The Ambassadors* have, like Isabel, this immense, magnificent desire to 'live') ultimately, in effect, turns his back on life. This is not unconnected, I think, with the fact that his characters never do anything like work. This description of Madame Merle is not untypical of a day in the life of a Henry James figure:

> When Madame Merle was neither writing, nor painting, nor touching the piano, she was usually employed upon wonderful tasks of rich embroidery, cushions, curtains, decorations for the chimney-piece; an art in which her bold, free invention was as noted as the agility of her needle. She was never idle, for when engaged in none of the ways I have mentioned she was either reading (she appeared to Isabel to read 'everything important'), or walking out, or playing patience with the cards, or talking with her fellow inmates.[21]

The contemplation of such a way of life is likely, after all, to lead to idealism, for the necessities behind such an existence are by no means obvious. It is a superficial criticism to accuse James of snobbery or even of being limited by his social environment (what artist is not?). But there can be no doubt that what the bourgeois world did for James was to turn him into a moral idealist chasing a chimera of ideal conduct divorced from social reality.

It is not that his sense of social reality is in any way weak. On the contrary his picture of his world has, it has already been emphasised, a magnificent solidity, a concrete richness of the subtlest power. Nor is he in any easy, obvious sense taken in by that world (note his attitude to Warburton, his description of American-French society in chapter XX and his total contempt for Osmond and his values); his picture of European bourgeois life is in its objective aspect as realistic as that of Balzac or Flaubert or Proust. No, if we are to isolate in James's novels the quality that is ultimately their limitation, it is to the core of his point of view, his philosophy, that we are led. The limiting factor in *The Portrait of a Lady* is the failure of James in the last analysis to dissociate himself from Isabel's errors of understanding.