THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

HENRY JAMES

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
GRAHAM GREENE

Oxford New York Toronto Melbourne
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1981

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
London Glasgow New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland
and associate companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City

The Portrait of a Lady *first published in book form 1881*
The New York Edition first published 1907

First published as a World's Classics paperback 1981

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
James, Henry, 1843–1916
The portrait of a lady. - (The World's classics).
I. Title
813'.4[F] PS2116.P6
ISBN 0-19-281514-8

Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Limited
Aylesbury, Bucks

INTRODUCTION

'The conception of a certain young lady affronting her destiny'—that is how Henry James described the subject of this book, for which he felt, next to *The Ambassadors*, the greatest personal tenderness. In his wonderful preface (for no other book in the collected edition of his works did he write a preface so rich in revelations and memories) he compares *The Portrait of a Lady* several times to a building, and it is as a great, leisurely built cathedral that one thinks of it, with immense smooth pillars, side-chapels, and aisles, and a dark crypt where Ralph Touchett lies in marble like a crusader with his feet crossed to show that he has seen the Holy Land; sometimes, indeed, it may seem to us too ample a shrine for one portrait until we remember that this master-craftsman always has his reasons: those huge pillars are required to bear the weight of Time (that dark backward and abysm that is the novelist's abiding problem): the succession of side-chapels are all designed to cast their particular light upon the high altar: no vista is without its ambiguous purpose. The whole building, indeed, is a triumph of architectural planning: the prentice hand which had already produced some works—*Roderick Hudson* and *The American*—impressive if clumsy, and others—*The Europeans* and *Washington Square*—graceful if slight, had at last learnt the whole secret of planning for permanence. And the subject? 'A certain young woman affronting her destiny.' Does it perhaps still, at first thought, seem a little inadequate?

The answer, of course, is that it all depends on the destiny, and about the destiny Henry James has in his preface nothing to tell us. He is always something of a conjurer in these prefaces: he seems ready to disclose everything—the source of his story: the technique of its writing: even the room in which he settles down to work

and the noises of the street outside. Sometimes he blinds the reader with a bold sleight of hand, calling, for example, *The Turn of the Screw* 'a fairy-tale pure and simple'. We must always remain on our guard while reading these prefaces, for at a certain level no writer has really disclosed less.

The plot in the case of this novel is far from being an original one: it is as if James, looking round for the events which were to bring his young woman, Isabel Archer, into play, had taken the first to hand: a fortune-hunter, the fortune-hunter's unscrupulous mistress, and a young American heiress caught in the meshes of a loveless marriage. (He was to use almost identically the same plot but with deeper implications and more elaborate undertones in *The Wings of the Dove*.) We can almost see the young James laying down some popular three-decker of the period in his Roman or Venetian lodging and wondering, 'What could I do with even that story?' For a plot after all is only the machinery—the machinery which will show the young woman (what young woman?) affronting her destiny (but what destiny?). In his preface, apparently so revealing, James has no answer to these questions. Nor is there anything there which will help us to guess what element it was in the melodramatic plot that attracted the young writer at this moment when he came first into his full powers as a novelist, and again years later when as an old man he set to work to crown his career with the three poetic masterpieces *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*.

The first question is the least important and we have the answer in Isabel Archer's relationship to Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*: it is not only their predicament which is the same, or nearly so (Milly's fortune-hunter, Merton Densher, was enriched by the later James with a conscience, a depth of character, a dignity in his corruption that Gilbert Osmund lacks: indeed in the later book it is the fortune-hunter who steals the tragedy, for Milly dies and it is the living whom we pity): the two women are identical. Milly Theale,

if it had not been for her fatal sickness, would have affronted the same destiny and met the same fate as Isabel Archer: the courage, the generosity, the confidence, the inexperience belong to the same character, and James has disclosed to us the source of the later portrait—his young and much-loved cousin Mary Temple who died of tuberculosis at twenty-four. This girl of infinite potentiality, whose gay sad troubled letters can be read in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, haunted his memory like a legend; it was as if her image stood for everything that had been graceful, charming, happy in youth—'the whole world of the old New York, that of the earlier dancing years'—everything that was to be betrayed by life. We have only to compare these pages of his autobiography, full of air and space and light, in which the figures of the son and brother, the Albany uncles, the beloved cousin, move like the pastoral figures in a Poussin landscape, with his description of America when he revisited the States in his middle age, to see how far he had travelled, how life had closed in. In his fiction he travelled even farther. In his magnificent last short story, *The Jolly Corner*, Brydon, the returned expatriate, finds his old New York house haunted by the ghost of himself, the self he would have become if he had remained in America. The vision is pursued by the unwitting Brydon from room to room until finally it is brought to bay under the fanlight in the hall and presents a face 'evil, odious, blatant, vulgar'. At that moment one remembers what James also remembered: 'the springtime of '65 as it breathed through Denton streets', the summer twilight sailing back from Newport, Mary Temple.

'In none of the company was the note so clear as in this rarest, though at the same time symptomatically or ominously palest, flower of the stem; who was natural at more points and about more things, with a greater sense of freedom and ease and reach of horizon than any of the others dreamed of. They had that way, delightfully, with the small, after all, and the common matters—while she had it with those too, but with the great and rare ones over and above; so that she was to remain for us the very figure and image of a felt interest in

life, an interest as magnanimously far-spread, or as familiarly and exquisitely fixed, as her splendid shifting sensibility, moral, personal, nervous, and having at once such noble flights and such touchingly discouraged drops, such graces of indifference and inconsequence, might at any moment determine. She was really to remain, for our appreciation, the supreme case of a taste for life as life, as personal living; of an endlessly active and yet somehow a careless, an illusionless, a sublimely fore-warned curiosity about it: something that made her, slim and fair and quick, all straightness and charming tossed head, with long light and yet almost sliding steps and a large light postponing, renouncing laugh, the very muse or amateur priestess of rash speculation.'

Even if we had not James's own word for it, we could never doubt that here is the source: the fork of his imagination was struck and went on sounding. Mary Temple, of course, never affronted her destiny: she was betrayed quite simply by her body, and James uses words of her that he could as well have used of Milly Theale dying in her Venetian palace—'death at the last was dreadful to her; she would have given anything to live', but isn't it significant that whenever an imaginary future is conceived for this brave spontaneous young woman it always ends in betrayal? Milly Theale escapes from her betrayal simply by dying; Isabel Archer, tied for life to Gilbert Osmund—that precious vulgarian, cold as a fishmonger's slab—is deserted even by her creator. For how are we to understand the ambiguity of the closing pages when Isabel's friend, Henrietta Stackpole, tries to comfort the faithful and despairing 'follower' (this word surely best describes Caspar Goodwood's relationship to Isabel):

'"Look here, Mr. Goodwood," she said; "just you wait!"
'On which he looked up at her—but only to guess, from her face, with a revulsion, that she simply meant he was young. She stood shining at him with that cheap comfort, and it added, on the spot, thirty years to his life. She walked him away with her, however, as if she had given him now the key to patience.'

It is as if James, too, were handing his more casual readers the key to patience, while at the same time

asserting between the lines that there is no way out of the inevitable betrayal except the way that Milly Theale and Mary Temple took involuntarily. There is no possibility of a happy ending: this is surely what James always tells us, not with the despairing larger-than-life gesture of a romantic novelist but with a kind of bitter precision. He presents us with a theorem, but it is we who have to work out the meaning of *x* and discover that *x* equals no-way-out. It is part of the permanent fascination of his style that he never does all the work for us, and there will always be careless mathematicians prepared to argue the meaning of that other ambiguous ending, when Merton Densher, having gained a fortune with Milly Theale's death, is left alone with his mistress, Kate Croy, who had planned it all, just as Madame Merle had planned Isabel's betrayal.

'He heard her out in stillness, watching her face but not moving. Then he only said: "I'll marry you, mind you, in an hour."

' "As we were?"

' "As we were."

'But she turned to the door, and her headshake was now the end. "We shall never be again as we were!" '

Some of James's critics have preferred to ignore the real destiny of his characters, and they can produce many of his false revealing statements to support them; he has been multitudinously discussed as a social novelist primarily concerned with the international scene, with the impact of the Old World on the New. It is true the innocent figure is nearly always American (Roderick Hudson, Newman, Isabel and Milly, Maggie Verver and her father), but the corrupted characters--the vehicles for a sense of evil unsurpassed by the theological novelists of our day, M. Mauriac or M. Bernanos—are also American: Mme Merle, Gilbert Osmond, Charlotte Stant. His characters are mainly American, simply because James himself was American.

No, it was only on the superficial level of plot, one feels, that James was interested in the American visitor;

what deeply interested him, what was indeed his ruling passion, was the idea of treachery, the 'Judas complex'. In the first novel he ever wrote, *Watch and Ward*, James dealt with the blackmailer, the man enabled to betray because of his intimate knowledge. As he proceeded in his career he shed the more obvious melodramatic trappings of betrayal, and in *The Portrait of a Lady* melodrama is at the point of vanishing. What was to follow was only to be the turning of a screw. Isobel Archer was betrayed by little more than an acquaintance; Millie Theale by her dearest friend; until we reach the complicated culmination of treacheries in *The Golden Bowl*. But how many turns and twists of betrayal we could follow, had we space and time, between *Watch and Ward* and that grand climax of betrayal!

This, then, is the destiny that not only the young women affront—you must betray or, more fortunately perhaps, you must be betrayed. A few—James himself, Ralph Touchett in this novel, Mrs. Assingham in *The Golden Bowl*—will simply sadly watch. We shall never know what it was at the very start of life that so deeply impressed on the young James's mind this sense of treachery; but when we remember how patiently and faithfully throughout his life he drew the portrait of one young woman who died, one wonders whether it was just simply a death that opened his eyes to the inherent disappointment of existence, the betrayal of hope. The eyes once open, the material need never fail him. He could sit there, an ageing honoured man in Lamb House, Rye, and hear the footsteps of the traitors and their victims going endlessly by on the pavement. It is of James himself that we think when we read in *The Portrait of a Lady* of Ralph Touchett's melancholy vigil in the big house in Winchester Square:

> 'The square was still, the house was still; when he raised one of the windows of the dining-room to let in the air he heard the slow creak of the boots of a lone constable. His own step, in the empty place, seemed loud and sonorous; some of the carpets had been raised, and whenever he moved he roused a melancholy echo. He sat down in one of the armchairs; the

big dark dining-table twinkled here and there in the small candle-light; the pictures on the wall, all of them very brown, looked vague and incoherent. There was a ghostly presence as of dinners long since digested, of table-talk that had lost its actuality. This hint of the supernatural perhaps had something to do with the fact that his imagination took a flight and that he remained in his chair a long time beyond the hour at which he should have been in bed; doing nothing, not even reading the evening paper. I say he did nothing, and I maintain the phrase in the face of the fact that he thought at these moments of Isabel.'

GRAHAM GREENE

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The Portrait of a Lady was first published in twelve parts in *Macmillan's Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly* from October 1880. Book publication in England and America came in 1881. Between magazine and book James made his first textual revisions, mostly to individual words. But for the selective New York Edition of his works twenty-six years later he returned to this greatest of his early novels with a 'late James' eye, ear, and sixth sense for what lies behind appearances. Thousands of changes were made: none lengthy, but together significant.

Four critics have examined James's revisions. Anthony Mazzella shows James's attentiveness by picking up changes to the first *volume* of the 1907 text foreshadowing the controversial end of the novel. Sydney Krause, comparing early and late revisions, argues that both show similar tendencies in style and thought, consistently refining and strengthening the original conception. This is what F. O. Matthiessen concludes, as he relates the revised *Portrait* to James's 'Major Phase'. Nina Baym, however, finds the New York text damaged by a late James enhancement of the aesthetic and intellectual at the expense of impulsive feeling: for her the purpose of the novel is baffled as its imaginative focus shifts.

Are the New York revisions an improvement? What do they reveal about James's concerns, stylistic or thematic: about the workings of his imagination? Can awareness of them help us to understand the novel, resolve or clarify its critical problems?

Some changes are straightforward: colloquialisms and contractions in speech make the text flow faster and less formally. But pace may point up a disingenuous ease. When Madame Merle tells Mrs. Touchett, 'You make me feel an idiot' for failing to notice Osmond's approach to courtship, her veiled contempt is nearer the surface than

in the original 'You make me feel like a fool' (p. 297). James refines her duplicities: 'Again Madame Merle was silent, while her thoughtful smile drew up her mouth *even more charmingly than usual* toward the left corner.' Against this, Mrs. Touchett's increasingly abrasive speech becomes poignantly clumsy: 'You must know this: whether that *curious creature's really* making love to my niece. . . . Don't tell me about his *probably quite cold-blooded* love-affairs; they're nothing to me.' (My italics indicate revisions.) James's irony is racier, Madame Merle's manipulation more reprehensible.

Editing out two pages analysing Osmond's motives for marrying Isabel, and altering the images that remain, again James heightens the chiaroscuro of manipulation and betrayal. Instead of an Isabel 'as bright and soft as an April cloud', we find: 'she would have been as smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm.' Osmond's ambition 'to succeed greatly' becomes, in a crass colloquialism, 'the desire to have something or other to show for his parts'. A blunted sensibility, despite his refined aestheticism, accounts for the degeneration from 'When at last the best did present itself Osmond recognised it like a gentleman' to vulgar self-interest: 'His "style" was what the girl had discovered with a little help; and now, beside herself enjoying it, she should publish it to the world without his having any of the trouble. She should do the thing *for* him, and he would not have waited in vain' (pp. 330–1).

If Isabel's dangers grow more blatant, her support appears increasingly inadequate. Henrietta Stackpole, originally a delightful mixture of girlish enthusiasm and American feminist, is given over to Ralph's wry relish as something nearer a caricature. 'She was very well dressed, in fresh, dove-coloured draperies' becomes, 'She rustled, she shimmered . . .' From 'scrupulously, fastidiously neat', he develops a preposterous typographical characterization: 'she was as crisp and new and comprehensive as a first issue before the folding. From top to toe she had probably no misprint. . . . she struck him as not at all in the large type, the type of horrid "headings", that he had

expected.' Her New World qualities are grossly exaggerated: the 'odour of the prairies' which Isabel enjoys, and which Ralph at first calls 'decidedly fragrant', becomes overpowering: ' "Henrietta . . . does smell of the Future —it almost knocks one down!" ' Her 'fine' courage grows positively resplendent: 'as Isabel had said, she was brave: she went into cages, she flourished lashes, like a spangled lion-tamer.' No wonder this Henrietta 'prompted mirth' in Ralph, who 'had long since decided that the *crescendo* of mirth should be the flower of his declining days'.

The New York Ralph is distinguished by laughter and flowers: a 'luxury of laughter', and, accepting his illness, 'His serenity was but the array of wild flowers niched in his ruin.' Such slender adjustments change Ralph little; but they maintain an imaginative correspondence between him and the more 'conscious' Isabel. Their vital sympathy, perfected at Ralph's death, helps clarify the issues of feeling and understanding which are then confirmed in the final chapter when Isabel turns from Goodwood's passion to her duty in Rome.

The death-bed scene with Ralph shows that Isabel's consciousness does not exclude emotion. James's increased colloquialism and added images, more concrete and precise, create a new strength of feeling. Not 'nervous and even frightened', but 'nervous and scared—as scared as if the objects about her had begun to show for conscious things, watching her trouble with grotesque grimaces', Isabel's reflection 'that things change but little, while people change so much' acquires particularized elegiac intensity: 'She envied the security of valuable "pieces" which change by no hair's breadth, only grow in value, while their owners lose inch by inch youth, happiness, beauty . . .' (p. 620). On Isabel's 'hot cheek' Mrs. Touchett's lips feel 'very thin indeed': the physical touch substantiates her aunt's emotional deprivation. But her own awareness is vigorous, far from arid. Her speculation on Mrs. Touchett's 'regret', the 'desire for the recreation of grief', is generously, even extravagantly, extended: 'Unmistakeably she would have found it a blessing to-day to be able to feel a defeat, a mistake, even a shame or two. She

wondered if she were not even missing those enrichments of consciousness and privately trying—reaching out for some aftertaste of life, dregs of the banquet; the testimony of pain or the cold recreation of remorse.' This is the Isabel whom Ralph could assure not only ' "that if you have been hated, you have also been loved" ', but ' "loved. Ah but, Isabel—*adored!*" '

Goodwood's adoration is of another kind. The late James accentuates both attraction and repulsion—not hesitation—in Isabel's response. 'Pressingly close' to her, the American's presence embodies a complex sexual force. James's rewording reveals a respect for 'something really formidable in his resolution' (1881: 'something awful in his persistency'). But Goodwood's melodramatic diction betrays him: ' "It will have cost you your life? Say it will" —and he flared almost into anger: "give me one word of truth! When I know such a horror as that, how can I keep myself from wishing to save you?" ' Isabel's sense of his emotion is conveyed with metaphorical extravagance: 'this was the hot wind of the desert, at the approach of which the others dropped dead, like mere sweet airs of the garden. It wrapped her about; it lifted her off her feet; while the very taste of it, as of something potent, acrid and strange, forced open her set teeth.' The stylistic crescendo, 'harsh and terrible', of Goodwood's passion prepares for his notoriously extended kiss,

> like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink.

The whole weight of James's revisions argues against any failure on his part to recognize the potent sexuality here. And his recognition, surely, becomes Isabel's. It is neither insensibility nor cowardice, but experience, that emerges from this kiss, 'But when darkness returned she was free.'

NICOLA BRADBURY

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N. A. L. B.