

ISABEL ARCHER: "GROUND IN THE VERY MILL OF THE CONVENTIONAL"

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"For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds"
(Shakespeare Sonnet 94)

When addressing the "old-fashioned distinction between the novel of character and the novel of incident," between the "novel and the romance," Henry James argued for the interdependence of "character" and "incident"; indeed, given that the "terms may be transposed," the assertion is of some kind of seamless unity between the two ("Art of Fiction" 392). Wallace Martin has suggested that in "The Art of Fiction" "functions and characters cannot be separated because they are always in a reciprocal relationship, one determining the other" (116).¹ James might have wanted to argue for this kind of reciprocity, but character emerges as dominant: character is the "determination of incident" whereas incident is only the "illustration of character." Character is presupposed as that which determines those incidents which, in turn, only "illustrate," or throw that character into light. For James the novel "as a living thing," an "organism," could thrive only if there was this hierarchy of interdependent parts ("Art of Fiction" 393).

James celebrated in Turgenev what he saw as novels and stories organised around, generated by, and consisting entirely of character rather than plot.² "Character, character expressed and exposed, is in all these things what we inveterately find," he wrote. Yet, that appositional "character expressed and exposed" undermines the primacy of "character," and suggests that notions of individual choice, freedom, and control are highly tenuous. At one pole the simplest account of Turgenev "is to say that the mere play of character constitutes in every case his sufficient drama"; at the other "it is of his essence that he sets it in the general flood of life, steeped in its relations and contacts, struggling or submerged, a hurried particle in the stream" ("Ivan Turgenieff" 15061). At the discursive level, in terms of saying, character *is* all; but in "essence" such characters struggle in and are submerged by the flood.

I want to argue that Isabel Archer's experience directly contradicts James's vision of her in the New York Preface and annuls the theory of character hazarded there, in "The Art of Fiction" and elsewhere: "I seemed to have met . . . the trick of investing some

¹ Contrast Tzvetan Todorov in *The Poetics of Prose* (1971): "If the two are indissolubly linked, one is more important than the other nonetheless—character, that is, characterization, that is, psychology" (66).

² The Preface to *Roderick Hudson* positions the "consciousness" of Rowland Mallett as central: *The American* constitutes "itself organically as his adventure; in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the centre of the subject, notionally, is in the "consciousness" of Isabel Archer; similarly, Hyacinth Robinson, "sprang up . . . out of a London pavement" and is the "centre of our subject"; Miriam Roth, in *The Tragic Muse*, is central despite being "objective" (her consciousness is not analysed, revealed, interpreted); even in *The Spoils of Poynton*, where the Preface emphasises "Things," "the real centre" is "the felt beauty and value of the prize of battle" and the "common consciousness" of "their great dramatic part" (Blackmur 16, 36, 51, 57, 67, 89, 126).

conceived or encountered individuals with the germinal property and authority. . . . I could think so little of any fable that didn't need its agents positively to launch it" (*Art of the Novel* 44). In the Preface the "plot" is clearly subordinated to that "character" which is seen as generating it. Imbricated here are not only problems of authorial control but the vexatious question of any sense of life predicated on precepts of free will and the like. James's Notebook entries are relevant here. Unlike the Prefaces of course the notebooks were not destined for immediate public consumption. "The idea of the whole thing is that the poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who has done, as she believes a generous, natural, clear-sighted thing, finds herself ground in the very mill of the conventional (*Notebooks* 15).³ The phrase "ground in the very mill of the conventional" is given by James to Ralph Touchett at the end of the novel; and its full significance is something I shall want to consider later. What matters here is that there is no sense in the actual planning of the novel as recorded in his notes of James having a character float before him, generating actions. On the contrary one section of the entry is enough to show how conscious James was of the degree of artifice involved in intensifying illusions of the life of the text. In fact there is an ambiguity in James's remarks which serves to announce the reflexive plan of the novel: "Isabel awakens from her sweet delusion—oh, the art required for making the delusion natural!—and finds herself face to face with a husband who has ended by conceiving a hatred for her own larger qualities (15).

Sharply double-edged is the remark about "the art required for making the delusion natural": it can be seen as relating not only to the novel's strenuous naturalisations of its enmeshing artifice, but also to the illusions and delusions fostered in its paratext of critical writings. Ellman Crasnow has suggested that in what he calls James's "countertext," or "scenario" (extending James's use of the term), his "non-fiction" "functions as both pretext and metatext" in that its topic is recurrently another writing which it both engenders and proleptically describes (Crasnow 150). In these terms, however, the Prefaces should be regarded more as a kind of analeptic rather than a proleptic engendering. They amount to the retrospective provision of an environment for the organism of the text. Whereas the novel and its founding illusions expire more or less at the close, the Preface is an attempt at re-inspiration and recuperation.

The Portrait of a Lady involves a double transplantation: that of James's original conception of Isabel Archer as a "character" into the text of the novel—the initiating "story" as "The Art of Fiction" has it (400)—and her own movement into the texture of a Europe thick with plots. She is an idea requiring and resisting form, an independent American possessing the means for a limited independence but with an imagination—and eventually, with deadly consequences, the means—for much more. Isabel struggles throughout to avoid conventionality, this being a version of James's own obsession with the privileging of character over plot. Isabel is presented as being egotistical and imaginative, she is punished not just because she is both, but also because she is a woman who dares to imagine first that she can live without men, and second that she

³ Richard Freedman in *Eliot, James and the Fictional Self: A Study in Character and Narration* regards this as the "stated intention" of the novel (111); but this does not square with the published intentions in the Preface.

can marry on the basis of some kind of design of her own. Isabel's desperate avowals of having chosen freely correspond to that prefatorial privileging of character over plot and intra-textual assignments and claims, self-deleting because ever-shifting, for the organising invention of the novel. Both character and text depend for an illusion of life upon a concealing of their being contingent on plotting and plots, artifice and craft, the mechanical rather than the organic. I want to concentrate on the extent to which in *The Portrait of a Lady* there is a reflexive exploration of the theory of life on which its founding aesthetic is based, an exploration which reveals and conceals its incoherence. It is arguable that this novel destructively grounds the organicist ideals of "The Art of Fiction" as an inevitable consequence of attempting to realise them in practice. Isabel's animated speculations and those of organicist aesthetics are available for a writing out and in turn a writing off.

Isabel is launched in terms of spontaneity, naturalness, and freedom. "I'm not," she early has it, "a candidate for adoption," "I'm very fond of my liberty" (1: 23-24 [ch. 2]). The narrator describes her as a "spontaneous young woman from Albany" (1: 85-86 [ch. 7]) and raises questions concerned with freedom and choice similar to those of the Preface: "She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself?" (1: 87 [ch. 7]). She early announces, with intense dramatic irony, that she doesn't "need the aid of a clever man to teach" her "how to live." She can "find it out for" herself (1:223 [ch. 16]), she wishes to "choose" her "fate" (2: 229 [ch. 16]). The project, however, is limited for "essential reasons" to the ideal, the imaginary and at best to imitations of experience: "There were essential reasons why one's ideal could never become concrete. It was a thing to believe in, not to see—a matter of faith, not of experience. Experience, however, might supply us with very creditable imitations of it, and the part of wisdom was to make the best of these" (1: 266 [ch. 19]). Isabel may be ideal, but she is unrealised; or rather, she is ideal because she is unrealised. She occupies that space anterior to the novel, and her freedom, together with a realisation of its attendant illusion, is suspended there. Any movement from the "ideal" to the "real" is precarious: realisations involve loss, disappointment, and death.

Isabel is "natural" and ideal because unmarried and therefore unconventional; "conventional" being one synonym for the mechanical and unnatural. This means both that she is free of the plot awaiting most women in the nineteenth century, and that the novel has found a momentary strategy for detaching itself from the popular and the mechanical. In a later exchange with Ralph Isabel establishes the position precisely: "You talk about one's soaring and sailing, but if one marries at all one touches the earth" (2: 74 [ch. 34]). Even more tellingly there is Madame Merle's assertion that "a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere; wherever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and, more or less, to crawl (1: 280 [ch. 19]). Necessarily, then, the questions of Isabel Archer's development are attended by menacing and predatory images of mechanical containment. Lily, for instance, is disappointed with Isabel's "development": so far, she had given neither "form" nor "body" to her inherited fortune (2: 34 [ch. 31]). When Warburton is willing to develop her, we read of Isabel as being, potentially, "some wild, caught creature in a vast cage" (1: 153 [ch. 12]). Isabel's enthusiasm is for free and vital development; Caspar Goodwood, however, might "some

day prove a sort of blessing in disguise—a clear and quiet harbour, enclosed by a brave granite breakwater" (1: 323 [ch. 21]).

Osmond, in language which connotes the mechanical and menacing transposition of the sexual act (integral, of course, to Isabel's parodic *felix culpa*, her encounter with experience and knowledge), describes himself as being "as rusty as a key that has no lock to fit it" (1: 371 [ch. 24]). Appropriately enough, at the point where he declares some kind of love for Isabel, there is nearby an image of containment with a phallic charge. After he has vacuously informed her that "I'm absolutely in love with you," "the tears came into [her] eyes: this time they obeyed the sharpness of the pang that suggested to her somehow the slipping of a fine bolt—backward, forward, she couldn't have said which" (2: 18 [ch. 29]). When there is something like a full realisation (in all available senses) of the circumstances, Isabel sees "this rigid system close about her, draped though it was in pictured tapestries, that sense of darkness and suffocation . . . took possession of her; she seemed to be shut up with an odour of mould and decay" (2: 199 [ch. 42]).

Arising in conversation with Madame Merle and Isabel is the whole question of the inevitably unsatisfactory nature of the realisation of the ideal, of its materialisation and production, and the extent to which self-expression is at least partly determined by externals. Eventually, as part of its critique of her egotism and self-absorption, the novel makes Isabel realise the extent to which she is a function of her relations with others, and how entangled a business life is. But at this earlier stage Isabel rejects Madame Merle's contention that "every human being has his shell . . . the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman" (1: 287 [ch. 19]). Further as Isabel clings to her prelapsarian innocence, she denies that the "clothes" which she chooses "to wear . . . express" her: "I don't know whether I succeed in expression myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one" (1: 288 [ch. 19]). Once married Isabel has to negotiate abundant frames, boundaries, and rigidities. Far from being an autonomous individual with organic imperatives, there is "something fixed and mechanical" about her expression (2: 142 [ch. 39]).

The rhetoric of Isabel's presentation is that of production, the mechanical, art, and the artificial: "Now, at all events, framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady" (2: 105 [ch. 37]). How cluttered she now is with those clothes whose function as an expression of identity she earlier denied to Madame Merle: "Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament. The free, keen girl had become quite another person" (2: 143 [ch. 39]). In producing Isabel Osmond penetrates (the sexual metaphors are cumulatively potent in the narrative of Isabel's development towards completion) to the destruction of those ideals on which her life has depended; he has expropriated her so as to expose the other Isabels beyond the superficial: "But she was, after all, herself—she couldn't help that; and now there was no use pretending, wearing a mask or a dress, for he knew her and had made up his mind" (2: 190-91 [ch. 42]). By contrast with the terms on which she is launched, Isabel is described as "a woman who knew that she had thrown away her life" (2: 203 [ch. 42]). Now, she says, "I enjoy things when they're done; but I've no ideas. I

can never propose anything" (2: 131 [ch. 38]). More pointedly, "she had lost her illusions" (2: 312 [ch. 48]).

The world of Isabel's habitation has been a figment of her imagination, a world of no substance. In reality she is the function of the mechanical intrigues and productive capacities of others; especially of course of Madame Merle. Her illusion is that of having painted Osmond's portrait, of arranging her sense of him to her own advantage; that the novel's title refers both to Isabel and her designs on life and others is masked by a New York revision which substitutes "figures" for "portraits" in the following: "She had not read him right. A certain combination of features had touched her, and in them she had seen the most striking of figures" ["portraits" in 1881] (2: 34 [ch. 3]).

Freedom and self-determination, like the idea of organic art, are illusions; it is in the realms of mechanism and death that certainties dwell. Isabel is likened to an Eve whose taking of the fruit in the Garden of Eden was the original sin. Gilbert Osmond, "the finest—in the sense of being the subtlest—manly organism she had ever known" has, Isabel initially believed, "become her property" and the "recognition of her having to put out her hands and take it had been originally a sort of act of devotion" (2: 194 [ch. 42]). Here Isabel is a long way from the illusions fostered by the novel's New York Preface, where plots and intrigues are made to seem entirely peripheral to the importance of character: "Trying here, for recognition, the germ of my idea, I see that it must have consisted not at all in any conceit of a 'plot,' nefarious name, in any flash upon the fancy . . . but altogether in the sense of a single character . . . to which the usual elements of a 'subject,' certainly of a setting, were to need to be superadded" (*Art of the Novel* 42).

Isabel, because no longer an end in herself, but a means towards the ends of others is now a mechanical entity rather than an organism: "She saw . . . the dry staring fact that she had been an applied hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron" (2: 379 [ch. 52]).⁴ Mechanical imagery has replaced the natural and the organic in the same way that Isabel's ideals, in the process of realisation, have inevitably been conventionalised. This opposition in favour of the former is central to "The Art of Fiction"; and it is precisely its ordering that the practice of *The Portrait of a Lady* reverses:

Many people speak of [the novel] as a factitious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, the business of which is to alter and arrange the things that surround us, to translate them into the conventional, traditional moulds, This, however, is a view of the matter which carries us but a very short way, condemns the art to an eternal repetition of a few familiar clichés, cuts short its development, and leads us straight up to a dead wall. (*Partial Portraits* 397-98)

⁴ Immanuel Kant envisaged a "kingdom of ends" in which each person "should treat himself and all others, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end in himself" (Kant's emphases). Women and men are organisms by virtue of being ends and final rather than effective causes (*Moral Law* 100-01; *Critique of Judgement* 2: 109).

However unwittingly, in revealing both Isabel's fate and that of the theories of the fiction and life she embodies, the novel echoes "The Art of Fiction": "She had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end (2: 189 [ch. 42]).

I have already drawn attention to the reconstructive efforts of the Preface, the attempts made there to recuperate organic and vital ideas about character and the organic. In this respect the following passages are worth juxtaposing; the first is from the Preface, the second from *The Portrait of a Lady*:

The house of fiction has in short not one window but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene. . . . They are but windows at best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life . . . they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. (*Art of the Novel* 46)

Now that she was in the secret, now that she knew something that so much concerned her and the eclipse of which had made life resemble an attempt to play whist with an imperfect pack of cards, the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness All purpose, all intention, was suspended; all desire, too, save the single desire to reach her much-embracing refuge. Gardencourt had been her starting-point, and to those muffled chambers it was at least a temporary solution to return. (2: 390-91 [ch. 53])

Isabel's fate is the confronting of a "dead wall" (2: 189 [ch. 42]) complete with "disconnected visions" (2: 390 [ch. 53]). The process in which she and the reader have been involved is partly identified by Pierre Macherey: "When we explain the work, instead of ascending to a hidden centre which is the source of life (the interpretive fallacy is organicist and vitalist), we perceive its actual decentred-ness" (79). In a demonstration of James's own contention in his study "Guy de Maupassant" that "the work is often so much more intelligent than the doctrine" (244), *The Portrait of a Lady* seems to subvert not only itself, but the theory which informs it.⁵ The further implication raised by the "Guy de Maupassant" essay is that theory and realised character have an uneasy, potentially destructive relation: "There is many a creator of living figures whose friends . . . will do well to pray for him when he sallies forth into the dim wilderness of theory (243).

⁵ Compare with James's "Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*: "One's plan, alas, is one thing and one's result another" (qtd Blackmur 296).

As Macherey has argued:

There is a profound difference between the vague language of the imagination and that of the text; within the limits of the text this language is in several senses deposited (fallen, forsaken and gathered). The literary work interrupts and solidifies the apparent motion of the former—in which words are moved to no purpose; in this space where language confronts itself, is constructed that true distance which is the condition of any real progression—the discourse of the book. Determinate reverie: a true and necessary fiction, making its way to a specific destination. This is why, once again, there is little point in denouncing the myth which would endow the book with a semblance of life. Since it is built from the formless language of illusion, the books revolves around this myth; but in the process of its formation the book takes a stand regarding this myth, exposing it. (63)

“The Art of Fiction,” the Preface, and Isabel have the “vague language of the imagination” in common, a language much concerned with semblance of life. Once that language is “deposited” into the text of the novel, it becomes post-lapsarian (“fallen, forsaken and gathered”); solidification and purpose, an arrest of motion, come into play. Isabel’s reluctant discovery is that “character is a potential story” and that “every new character signifies a new plot” (Todorov 70). For Isabel Chapter 42 of Book 2 is a kind of “determinate reverie.” In this process the myth of life at the text’s margins of organicist discourse is “exposed”: “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!” (2: 415 [ch. 54]). As a completed character constituted by convention, Isabel is now lifeless. She has become, like James’s sense of a character in Alphonse Daudet’s *Fromont Jeune*, “a mechanical doll with nothing of the imagination to take hold of” (197).⁶

From their inception Isabel’s ambitions in the direction of choice and agency are authorial in proportions. But her “house of fiction,” as the novel continues to declare its engagement with James’s “The Art of Fiction,” becomes a “house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” (2: 196 [ch. 42]). Gardencourt represents for Isabel the elements of a narrative over which she wants to assume control. It is Osmond, though, who occupies the position of the author, or surrogate author: that of the “watcher” with the “consciousness of the artist”: “Osmond’s beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her” (2: 196 [ch. 42]). In this fissure stands revealed James’s own investment in Osmond’s subjugation of Isabel: Osmond, and ultimately James, cannot countenance imaginative rivalry let alone the idea of any kind of female creativity. *The Portrait of a Lady* arranges a final imaginative recuperation for Isabel and its own textual “life,” and attempts to reinscribe the terms on which organicist discourse lived: the spinning of a life-saving fiction of renunciation

⁶ Compare James’s similar comment on Alfred de Musset: “His own figure needs to a certain extent the help of our imagination” (“Alfred de Musset” 37).

predicated on absence, denial, and negation. These terms, however, serve to render Isabel's situation, and that of the aesthetic on which she is predicated, dire indeed.

Immanuel Kant's concept of appearances implies an inaccessible realm of the objective whose secrets—"too deeply buried for our investigation"—it constructs by keeping. Better perhaps that inaccessibility than a full encounter with the deterministic and mechanistic realities. Better still is a mystifying commitment to the possibility of a common derivation for the "heterogeneous principles" of the mechanistic and organic than a transcendent reconciliation of the two: "The principle common to the mechanical derivation, on the one hand, and the teleological, on the other, is the supersensible. . . . But of this we are unable from a theoretical point of view to form the slightest positive determinate conception." The principle is common to the phenomenal and transphenomenal: it presupposes "a supersensible ground" and therefore assures "the possibility of both being reconciled" (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 70-71). The tangled skeins of organicist discourse, including scientific approaches to the problem of how to define life, have always traded in secrets, the unknowable, depth, and the concealed: "When I speak of objects in time and space, it is not of things in themselves, of which I know nothing, but of things in appearance, i.e. of experience, as a particular way of cognizing objects which is only affordable to man" (Kant, *Prolegomena* 82).

The "idea" of the "thing-in-itself" has "certainly to be introduced on the basis of the possibility of . . . objects of experience, although it cannot itself be elevated or extended into a cognition (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 1: 13). In such a discourse: "Animal species differ at their peripheries, and resemble each other at their centres; they are connected by the inaccessible, and separated by the apparent" (Foucault 267). George Henry Lewes consigned life to the "unknowable," its being "one of the many mysteries surrounding us" which "cannot be unveiled" (*Physiology of Common Life* 422-23). The French anatomist and biologist Xavier Bichat was keen to restrict the reach of his analysis and, significantly, he expressed such restrictions in terms of veils, reading, and the forbidden: "So narrow indeed are the limits of human understanding, that the knowledge of first causes has almost always been interdicted. The veils, which cover them, envelopes with its innumerable folds whoever attempt to read it" (*Physiological Researches* 422-23).

Bichat's ultimate exploration was of "the limits of every organized part," the nature of their "textures" remaining "unknown" (*General Anatomy* 1: lv). For Berzelius "the chain of experience must always end in something inconceivable" but "unfortunately, the inconceivable something acts the principal part." Such a something is twice-removed, being both "inconceivable" and "deeply hidden from our view" (5, 8). Claude Bernard acknowledged his boundaries, observing that the "manifestations of life cannot be wholly elucidated by the physio-chemical phenomena known in inorganic nature." Even more strikingly he approached the entity of life itself as a discursive formation: "The words life, death, health, disease, have no objective reality. When a physiologist calls in vital force or life, he does not see it; he merely pronounces a word." Vital "causes" were simply supposed by Bichat ("let us suppose causes, and attach ourselves to their general result" [*Physiological Researches* 79]) and regarded, by Bernard, as "just a kind of medical superstition" (68). Both positions come close to that of seeing life as some kind of necessary fiction. An account of life other than the mechanical, or

materialist, Lewes suggested, "is a fiction; but we do not on that account reject it. Fictions are potent . . . This fiction has been tested, and has proved a failure. Nevertheless it has left behind it a convenient phrase" (*Problems of Life* 1: 46).

Kant dogmatically asserts—proscribing in the process any attempt to gain knowledge of this kind—that it is "quite certain that we can never get a sufficient knowledge of organized beings and their inner possibility, much less get an explanation of them, by looking merely to mechanical principles of nature." This pursuit is "absurd"; and "such insight we must absolutely deny to mankind" (*Critique of Judgement* 2: 54). The resonance here is of that primal injunction concerning the "tree of knowledge" and death (Genesis 2. 17). Examined too deeply, there is an equivalence between "life" and "death," in terms of essential mechanism, which organicist discourse works to defer and conceal. Not surprisingly Kant quotes with approval an inscription he encountered on the Temple of Isis: "I am all that is, and that was, and shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from my face" (*Critique of Judgement* 1: 179n). Restricting the imagination, denying access to knowledge, and arguing for the ultimate imponderability of life imply (respectively) absolute realms beyond, the possibility of complete knowledge, and powerful secrets. The intersection is between the present, contingent and apparent, and the absent, incontinent and real. Life is possible, bearable, significant, and even interesting, not for what it is, but for what it is not.

Isabel's refusal of Lord Warburton's offer at the outset of the novel is important not least because it represents a rejection of a conventional romance, a plot revolving around the marriage of an American "innocent" to an English aristocrat; the kind of situation, for instance, which Henrietta Stackpole finds herself in with Bantling. Isabel's imagination extends much further than that. In its undeveloped form it includes the notion that unhappiness and suffering, tragedy and a lack of closure being the formal correlatives, are essential to life. The consequences of marrying Warburton, Isabel believes at this stage, would be those of being separated "from the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer" (1: 187 [ch. 14]). Isabel's desire is to develop from within, to resist artifice and the artificial, and to see life on the basis of her independent choices; the rejection is of a mechanical system imposed from without, some confinement within the conventional intrigue of a cheap romance.

The irony is that in avoiding marriage with Warburton, Isabel is released into exercising an imagination, facilitated by Ralph, in the direction of constructing a fantastical Gilbert Osmond from the simple mechanism of a fortune-hunter and inadvertently a complex set of previously inconceivable determinants. Until her final renunciation of Goodwood and her imaginative securing of an alternative life not pursued, direct suffering and experience displace mere observation and imitations of experience. But Isabel's initiating rejection of Warburton is also important because it signifies a freedom to choose predicated on denial, renunciation, and absence. The outcome of the novel is a measure of how unacquainted with her own "nature" and the structure of imaginative processes and freedom Isabel was earlier: "It's not my fate to give up—I know it can't be" (1: 186 [ch. 14]). By definition the imagination can only thrive on the absent, the unknown, and on what was not chosen; its canons are those of concealment, illusion, ignorance, and denial, rather than those of revelation, truth, knowledge. Such of course are also the canons of organicist accounts of life. The novel

comes full circle with Isabel's return to Gardencourt. Away from Italy Isabel seems once more to be in a position where she is free to choose. As Goodwood observes: "It's too late to play a part; didn't you leave all that behind you in Rome?" (2: 432 [ch. 556]); the renewed struggle is to avoid, yet again, being a text inscribed by others.

Isabel's return to Italy is a denial of an alternative life, of an apparently unconventional kind, with Goodwood. But it is more urgently the conversion of a potential determinant into an absent alternative against which the life of the present—an illusion, that is, of its being freely chosen—can be defined. There seems to be a perfect fit, however, between Isabel's position and Althusser's account of the Subject as "subjected being": "stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission" (169). Ultimately, or penultimately at least, and at the second attempt, the illusion is of Isabel's locating a form of expression, or non-expression, whose syntax is that of renunciation: appropriately enough, in the garden where she first sought her independence and life, the temptation of Goodwood's tree of knowledge is resisted in favour of the cup of Gethsemane; the meshes of Ralph's posthumous schemes are avoided. When Judas kisses Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, it initiates a fiction of suffering, renunciation, death, and redemption here imitated in part by an Isabel who (like so many of James's characters) returns to her Puritan origins. Goodwood's kiss—Is it only a kiss? Is there a more erotic moment in James's work?—determines the future trajectory of her narrative. Isabel recoils from this sexual encounter—anchored as all such encounters are in a deep structure of knowledge, carnal knowledge, and the loss of appearances and life-enabling fictions (hence the force of that "spread")—partly because she has never had an appetite for knowledge, least of all now when life-saving fictions are imperative:

His kiss was 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. . . . But when darkness returned she was free. . . . She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path. (2: 436 [ch. 55])

Twice in the novel James echoes Milton's "the world lay all before them" (12: 646), thereby reinforcing the Isabel-Eve analogue and compelling the reader to consider paradises lost, if not regained. The first occurrence is before Isabel is married, when she seems free to do what she chooses: "The world lay before her—she could do whatever she chose" (2: 36 [ch. 31]); the second is in this composite Eden-Gethsemane, when Goodwood tells her that "the world's all before us—and the world's very big (2: 435 [ch. 55]).⁷ For Isabel now contraction rather than expansion is the issue as she retreats

⁷ "The world was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest" (John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 12. 645-46). For an excellent analysis of some of the novel's Miltonic dimensions see Robert Weisbuch's "Henry James and the Idea of Evil."

from experience in a desperate attempt to recover a lost innocence. Knowledge, experience, sex, and indeed life itself, are simply grist for her tragic mill. When Isabel earlier sought to exercise her imagination, the narrator had nothing but venomous observations to make; now that she is bound for a life of renunciation, now that she occupies as a woman the familiar terrain of tragic fortune, the narrative readily approves.

If independent life for Isabel begins with refusing Warburton, then a concentration on her refusing Goodwood rather than on accepting her fate with Osmond at least allows an illusion of its continuing. This is the sense in which Goodwood has proved to be, to return to that quotation, “a sort of blessing in disguise—a clear and quiet harbour, enclosed by a brave granite breakwater” (1: 323 [ch. 21]). Isabel’s “life” then is not an affair of being and doing, but of not being and not doing. If it is contingent on expression and realisation, then a definition in terms of what is not expressed and realised is the ideal. Until meeting Osmond, Isabel is not-Lady-Warburton; now, at least, there is an illusion of choosing to be not-Mrs-Goodwood rather than Mrs Osmond. The homologies are with the strategies in organicist discourse for denying access to any knowledge of life, for regarding the vital principle as concealed and absent rather than revealed and present. Incoherent, perilous, and insubstantial as it is, the construction is of some kind of life-enabling fiction, of a paradise regained.

Significantly Isabel’s initial sense of life is defined in terms of limited knowledge, ignorance, and essential secrets. She “had no wish to look out, for this would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side” (1: 30 [ch. 3]). Even more tellingly the commentary later has it that “with all her love of knowledge, she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners. The love of knowledge co-existed in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance” (2: 284 [ch. 19]). The principle is one observed by Gaston Bachelard: “There will always be more things in a closed, than in an open, box. To verify images kills them, and it is always more enriching to imagine than to experience” (88). It is not only, I would argue, the capacity to “see through all false appearances” which defines James’s artistic vision, but the ability, after exercising that capacity, to construct the death-deferring fictions which obstruct knowledge (Tanner 218).

In the fate of Isabel the novel can be seen as deconstructing theories vaunted in “The Art of Fiction” and reconfigured in the New York Preface; but however unconvincingly, the Preface too seeks to reinforce a sense of novelistic vitality contingent on silence, absence, and the unretrievable: “All this is a long way round, however, for my word about my dim first move toward ‘The Portrait,’ which was exactly my grasp of a single character—an acquisition I had made, moreover, after a fashion not here to be retraced” (*Art of the Novel* 47). If the novel deconstructs “The Art of Fiction” with its commitment to organic novels centred on vital characters, the recuperation of Isabel Archer hollows out the very notion of life.

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