PARIS AS A VISUAL SITE OF MEANING IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE AMBASSADORS*

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the symbolic significance of Paris in Henry James's novel entitled* The Ambassadors *and James's and his protagonist Lambert Strether's consequent role in the process of creating and maintaining the particular image of this important European metropolis that resided and still continues to reside in the consciousness of travellers in general and American travellers in particular.*

James, an American by birth, has always been considered as one of the most important Transatlantic writers, who traveled extensively and spent a considerable amount of time in Europe's metropolises. His preoccupation with the cultural differences between America and Europe, the significance of the inestimable intellectual and artistic heritage that can be traced in such cities as Rome, London or Paris are among the central issues of his fictional output.

Connected to this focus, James's stories of American "innocents" visiting the old continent in search of experience are brilliant sociological and psychological studies of the relationship between the individual and society, as well as the individual's relation to her/himself ("quests" for self, an endeavor to understand and accept oneself). Lambert Strether's life-changing visit to Paris and the catalytic effect of this city in The Ambassadors provides an excellent ground for an investigation of all the above-mentioned issues.

Key words: *Henry James,* The Ambassadors*, Paris, innocents abroad, ekphrasis*

I am focusing here on the cultural and symbolic aspects of travel as well as the symbolic significance and catalytic effect of Paris in Henry James's novel entitled *The Ambassadors*. Let me begin with a quick glance at the two basic concepts I am using here, namely "travel as an archetypal activity" and "spatiality."

Human geographer Edward W. Soja was the first one to introduce the term "spatial turn" around the 1950s, claiming that research had hitherto focused on time and neglected the concept of space. Soja argued that the link between spatiality and time is essential when it comes to sundry fields of thought, especially literature. Soja's theory is, in fact, derived from French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, whose theoretical framework refuses to separate physical from mental space, which is

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complemented by Soja with a refusal to separate real and imagined space, calling the latter "thirdspace," which posits a link between physical, geographical, mental, and cultural types of space. Kathrin Winkler (2012), whose study on the "spatial turn in literature" I have also used for this paper, argues that, to quote, "it is precisely in this bringing together of real and imagined spaces that Soja's model of space could be picked up in literary studies" (p. 254).

Another study I found constructive for this research is Robert Alter's *Imagined Cities*, where Alter (2010)

> […] traces the arc of literary development triggered by the runaway growth of urban centers from the early nineteenth century through the first two decades of the twentieth. As new technologies and arrangements of public and private space changed the ways people experienced time and space, the urban panorama became less coherent – a metropolis defying traditional representation and definition, a vast jumble of shifting fragments and glimpses – and writers were compelled to create new methods for conveying the experience of the city.

It is needless to say that one of the most important metropolises of the time was, and still is, Paris and that Henry James was one of the most radical figures of contemporary times when it came to innovation concerning narrative technique. A large part of his work is a constant striving to depict not only the "vast jumble of shifting fragments" that is none other than the modern individual – as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan will have it – but also the jumble of fragments that are the contemporary "metropolises defying traditional representation and definition."

As to travel as an archetypal activity, I am using here the theoretical framework of Éva Bús, the basis of which is metaphor theory. Within this framework, the archetypal activity of lyric verbal icons is confession or prayer, that of dramas is fight or combat and, most significantly for us here, the archetypal activity of narratives – or prose fiction, if you will – is travel or journey. In order to elaborate, let me quote Bús (2008):

> Travelling involves not just the physical activity alone but it is an experience lived through as well, and the things experienced between the points of departure and destination leave impressions in the mind and the soul enriching in this way the traveller's self, or, at times they even induce a radical turn in his conception of the world and his life. A journey made "without," that is, mostly in spatial and temporal terms, could also be accompanied by a journey made "within," that is, in mental and

> psychological terms, involving the movement of the inner self towards a state of being different in quality from that owned by it before. (p. 106)

In other words, life is both an inner and an outer journey; it is an inner travel through time from birth to death, a quest for survival, for meaning, for countless things that drive us on, but at the same time it is also a series of physical journeys. Interestingly, the narrative as a verbal icon focuses on the journeys of protagonists, while it is, at the same time, a journey itself; to refer to Bús (2008) again, "due to the general and particular temporary, spatial and practical aspects of travelling, it may also be viewed as the metaphor of such activities as the writing (configuring) and reading (refiguring) of a narrative work" (p. 107).

Tied to this is the more specific investigation of "travel as a cultural metaphor" in American literature, which was the topic of one of my favorite seminars during my M.A. years. Our professor, Zsófia Bán at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, claimed that to study travel in American literature is to engage in the exploration of issues such as self and other, nation, identity, and culture.

Henry James is particularly interesting in this context. An American by birth, he has always been considered as one of the most important Transatlantic writers who travelled extensively and spent a considerable amount of time in Europe's metropolises. James focuses on the cultural differences between America and Europe and their subtle influence on people's personal attitudes and values concerning Morality, Beauty, Tradition, human relationships, etc. The typical protagonist of his works is an innocent American subject who is mostly a young girl, as for instance Isabel Archer in his novel entitled *The Portrait of a Lady*, or sometimes a middle-aged man as Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*. Having a lot in common, the essential similarity is their fate: American innocence betrayed by subtle, old Europe with all its tradition, aestheticism, and intrigue.

Connected to this focus, James's stories of American "innocents" visiting the old continent in search of experience are also brilliant sociological and psychological studies of the relationship between the individual and society, as well as the individual's relation to her/himself. To put it differently, these are "quests" for self, an endeavor to understand and accept oneself. Thus, in the case of Jamesian narratives, the archetypal activity of travel is doubly apt, as the gist of these stories is always the physical and mental journey of protagonists.

As to these American innocents of Jamesian fiction, the reader very often gets the impression that besides lacking enough tradition, America permeates the mind of its people with a certain Puritan "block morality," or rather, a "moral block" that hinders them from opening up to the perception of Beauty through their senses and from looking for a passion to live for, and, most important of all, it hinders them from

trying to live all they can. Woollett, this novel's American City with all its sober, work-oriented Puritan mentality, still lives vividly within Strether as he arrives in Chester, England, on his way to Paris. As it was mentioned earlier, he is a middle-aged man – the same age as James was when writing the book, and according to some critics, the embodiment of James's fellow American writer, William Dean Howells; a man who had not as yet lived and for whom it was almost too late to gain experience through the senses – at least according to James.

Strether comes to Europe as an "ambassador" of his fiancée, Mrs. Newsome, whose son he is to rescue from a very unsuitable love-affair with an older married Frenchwoman called Madame de Vionnet and to take home as soon as possible. Upon his arrival, Strether still has a double consciousness; one is trying to obey the sober-proper Woollett values, while the other – the so-called Hellenistic as opposed to the so-called Hebraistic attitude, to use Matthew Arnold's terminology – is set on relaxing and enjoying Art and Beauty that Europe has to offer.

Strether, a true Jamesian protagonist, has a lot of imagination, who, to quote from the novel, "could amuse himself with small things," (1959, p. 75), thereby seeing more into things than what really was in them. This is a blessing and a curse at the same time, and in a place like Paris it is downright dangerous, especially if he wants to complete his rescue mission of his fiancée's son. Sure enough, he is soon led to believe in what Chad's friends call a "virtuous attachment" and he begins to view Madame de Vionnet in the light of an angel who has sacrificed everything for Chad and who has taught and refined him to perfection during his European stay. She has indeed done all that, but the attachment turns out to be far from virtuous, which deeply wounds Strether. The scales, however, do not fall off his eyes till the very end of the book, but when they do, instead of being angry with the couple, Strether adopts another cause; namely the rescue of Madame de Vionnet from being abandoned by Chad, who is indeed showing signs of having already tired of his lover.

What is important for my purpose here is that notorious spell or influence of Paris. Let me quote Kathleen Adler (2006) for a historical context first:

> Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century was the "Mecca of art students of both sexes." Being in Paris meant being plunged into an "art atmosphere" and it was "apt to strike the newcomer as being but one art studio." Americans came to Paris, as did visitors of many nationalities, for the excitement and stimulus of the greatest city of the age – "the capital of the nineteenth century," as Walter Benjamin declared in the twentieth. Paris superseded both Rome and London as the place to be – Rome and London were previously cities to which Americans made their pilgrimages in search of the culture of Old Europe. Paris was the center of the art world and,

> especially after the end of the American Civil War in 1865, thousands of American artists were attracted to Paris. As Henry James memorably said: "It sounds like a paradox, but it is a simple truth, that when to-day we look for American art, we find it mainly in Paris. When we find it out of Paris, we at least find a great deal of Paris in it." (p. 11)

For James, as for a true Modernist, putting an emphasis on vision and visual effects and wanting to make the reader see by showing rather than telling, Paris was a truly ideal setting for a novel. Having discovered the symbolic significance of space and Paris in particular as an artistic metropolis of his contemporary world, he makes this city come alive on his pages; it is represented through brilliant sketches of such symbolic spaces as cafés, theatres, churches, parks, famous streets and apartments of protagonists that are all pregnant with associations and crowded with ghosts of the past. There is the Rue des Malesherbes, the Fabourg Saint Germain, the Tuileries and the Luxemburg gardens, the Notre Dame, and the list could go on and on. In fact, this novel is as much a portrait of Paris as James Joyce's *Ulysses* is of Dublin. A much longer paper would be needed to do justice to all the significant places that are mentioned in *The Ambassadors*, which would enable the reader to trace step by step the insidious effect of Paris on Strether. Let me quote a wonderful passage from the novel, which is relatively early on, in Book 2, Chapter 2. Strether is looking for a spot to read his letters in peace. It is springtime.

> He came down the Rue de la Paix in the sun and, passing across the Tuileries and the river, indulged more than once – as if on finding himself determined – in a sudden pause before the book-stalls of the opposite quay. In the garden of the Tuileries he had lingered, on two or three spots, to look; it was as if the wonderful Paris spring had stayed him as he roamed. The prompt Paris morning struck its cheerful notes […]. He watched little brisk figures, figures whose movement was as the tick of the great Paris clock, take their smooth diagonal from point to point; the air had a taste as of something mixed with art, something that presented nature as a white-capped master-chef. The palace was gone, Strether remembered the palace; and when he gazed into the irremediable void of its site the historic sense in him might have been freely at play – the play under which in Paris indeed it so often winces like a touched nerve. He filled out spaces with dim symbols of scenes; he caught the gleam of white statues at the base of which, with his letters out, he could tilt back a straw-bottomed chair. But his drift was, for reasons, to the other side, and it floated him unspent up the Rue de Seine and as far as the Luxembourg. In the Luxembourg Gardens he pulled up; here at last he found

> his nook, and here, on a penny chair from which terraces, alleys, vistas, fountains, little trees in green tubs, little women in white caps and shrill little girls at play all sunnily "composed" together, he passed an hour in which the cup of his impressions seemed truly to overflow. (1959, p. 181)

James's description is pure ekphrasis – similarly to Walter Pater, the arch art critic of contemporary Aestheticism, James was also prone to paint verbal pictures of existing works of visual art, such as paintings, palaces, etc., in many of his writings; in this novel, the descriptions of Strether's strolls in Paris are so many verbal paintings of landmarks and, to make it even more interesting, we have James as a painter with words painting a picture of the vision of another artist, namely Strether himself, who, under the influence of Paris, begins to aestheticize life and continuously feels as if he were walking inside a picture. The most decisive scene of the novel towards the end is the best example of this; this is when he catches sight of Chad and Madame de Vionnet in an attitude that leaves no doubt as to the nature of their attachment. Strether is a typical Jamesian participant observer who is certainly more involved in the scenes he observes than Georg Simmel's "blasé individual" or Walter Benjamin's *flaneur* (2005, p. 22) – types that are otherwise so typical of the contemporary Parisian scene. So Strether thoroughly enjoys the beauties of the countryside only a short train-ride away from Paris, gazing at the picturesque riverside where a boat occupied by a lady and a gentleman soon catches his attention.

> What he saw was exactly the right thing – a boat advancing round the bend and containing a man who held the paddles and a lady, at the stern, with a pink parasol. It was suddenly as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day, and had now drifted into sight, with the slow current, on purpose to fill up the measure. […] The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent – that this wouldn't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt – and it made them but the more idyllic, though at the very moment of the impression, as happened, their boat seemed to have begun to drift wide, the oarsman letting it go. It had by this time none the less come much nearer – near enough for Strether to dream the lady in the stern had for some reason taken account of his being there to watch them. She had remarked on it sharply, yet her companion hadn't turned round […]. It was too prodigious, a chance in a million, but, if he knew the lady, the gentleman, who still presented his back and kept off, the gentleman, the coatless hero of the idyll, who had responded to her start, was, to match the marvel, none other than

> Chad. […] Strether became aware, with this, of what was taking place – that her recognition had been even stranger for the pair in the boat, that her immediate impulse had been to control it, and that she was quickly and intensely debating with Chad the risk of betrayal. […] It was a sharp fantastic crisis that had popped up as if in a dream, and it had had only to last the few seconds to make him feel it as quite horrible. (1959, p. 371)

It is also significant that the revelation comes about not in Paris the city – which is like a theater par excellence, the place where appearances are kept up at all costs – but in the countryside, closer to nature. Countless examples could be drawn where it is in the woods, in a forest, somewhere outside human habitation and rules, that something life-changing happens to protagonists. Significantly, here, in the vicinity of Paris, even the countryside is a brilliant stage and despite the accidental meeting that does bring about the unwelcome revelation, the show goes on and the lovers keep up their roles after the fragmentary lapse that has led Strether to the truth; Madame de Vionnet's quick start and the boat's rapid change of course and the back of Chad still strangely rigid and not turned.

And, finally, what happens to Strether after his adventure in Paris? How can he go on now that Paris has caused him to exchange his "Puritan glasses" for a pair of "Aesthetic spectacles" that has made life beautiful for him even if it has blinded him to the truth? As I mentioned earlier, he adopts the cause of rescuing the love between Chad and Madame de Vionnet and of defending the latter from being abandoned. He does not, however, remain in Paris for long and goes back to Puritan Woollett a sadder, wiser, and lonelier man. The spell of Paris is as strong as ever, but true to the Jamesian doctrine of renunciation, Strether sacrifices the joys and happiness that would be there in store for him. As a symbolic gesture, he goes back to his hometown, where he is robbed of beauty, culture, and even his fiancée's hand, who has unsurprisingly broken off the engagement. Strether thus returns to a kind of symbolic prison, to punish himself for the little enjoyment that he has had.

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