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# Henry James in New York City and Lambert Strether in Paris: The Cultural Aspect of Experience in *The American Scene* and *The Ambassadors*

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## Introduction

The cultural turn in American Studies has resulted in a theoretical and methodological shift within the discipline that we now call New American Studies. New American Studies defines itself as an interdisciplinary method focusing on the contact zones among diverse discourses of cultures (Rowe 7-8). The interaction of discourses such as the political, social, and artistic represents the object of analysis for today's critic of culture/s who is primarily interested in issues of race, class, gender, history, and politics as the themes where interdisciplinary study tends to locate discursive meeting points (see Kaplan, "'Left Alone'" 11; Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity" 115).

The cultural turn in James studies resulted in a recanonization process through which the image of James the formal master has been recarved: today we see James the latent homosexual producing tropes of repressed desire (Sedgwick 612-13), and James the cultural conservative justifying imperialism in his rhetoric (Seltzer 99-140). Also, there is a tendency among Jamesians to balance the politically unpopular with the artistically avant garde to say that James's aesthetic practice of representation in process excludes the possibility of ideological bias. These questions have been addressed to all the novels in James's extensive oeuvre, but the shift of interest has also resulted in the rediscovery of writings belonging to a so-called "fourth phase." This is the time when, having written the major novels he is traditionally famous for, he set out to write primarily nonfiction: apart from abandoned book projects and a string of short stories, he wrote volumes of autobiography, his Prefaces, edited the New York Edition of his work, and also published his travelogue about his visit to America.

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This travelogue entitled *The American Scene* has become a key text in James studies lately because it represents an ideal site where matters literary and cultural are linked. On the one hand, this travelogue is an explicit account of Modern American culture and its effects on American manners (Buelens 26-28; Ickstadt, "Concepts" 85-86). More precisely, it presents a critical view of the process of Modernization in America (Edel xxii). On the other hand, the persona of the narrative employs methods of imaginative representation that are very similar to the representational strategy of the late novels. The author-hero seeks to understand and interpret Modern America the same way as the heroes of the late novels tried to interpret interpersonal mysteries and bewilderments (Kovács, "Hybridity" 186-90; Scherzinger 171). Thus, James's aesthetic concerns become linked to his cultural concerns here in that he found a Modern society threatening to fuse and homogenize, a tendency he tries to resist by an imaginative projection of diversity and agency. It remains a question for Jamesians if his formalist rhetoric helps him justify his imperialism in *The American Scene* or if his focus on aesthetic experience makes him open to cultural difference (Piper 115).

I will not seek an answer to this haunting question; my interest is more specific: I focus on the linking of aesthetic experience or imaginative understanding and one's understanding of culture in *The American Scene* and *The Ambassadors*, one of James's most canonized texts, in order to investigate the rhetoric he uses. *The Ambassadors*, as a pre-modernist or modernist psychological novel, focuses on the representation of the workings of an individual consciousness, Strether's, as he tries to make sense of his experience performing his duties in Paris. I assume a basic similarity between the protagonists of *The Ambassadors* and *The American Scene* in that both are aliens in a land they have to make sense of and in that they both try to make sense of this land through imaginative projection (Piper 113; Scherzinger 170), the act of understanding in process. Yet, in *The American Scene*, one finds a basic cultural orientation since the subject of the process of understanding is modern America. But what happens if we see Lambert Strether, the imaginative hero of *The Ambassadors*, as a traveler similar to that of the persona in *The American Scene*? What would be the cultural aspects of the well-researched psychological adventure Strether undertakes and how would these be articulated?

The two travelers' architectural descriptions become metaphors of their experience in New York City and Paris, respectively. Buildings are natural phenomena for travelers to describe, but they also take on a special extra connotation in American literature where they indicate the degree to



which natural forces might be controlled (Poirier 17). In James's fictional universe architectural descriptions serve as references to the structure of the mind and language (Follini 33) as in his description of the house of fiction in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*—an architectural metaphor for the representative strategy in fiction (James 1076). Or consider the chamber of the mind in his "The Art of Fiction": the interior space where imaginative experience happens (52). Gail McDonald sums up this interest in the architectural by stating that James "invests architecture with epistemological meaning and explains epistemology in architectural terms" (231). Tamara Follini adds that beside epistemology, cultural concerns are also voiced in the architectural analogies: "architecture appeals to James as a richly creative analogue for a variety of artistic questions, and it is equally a pathway into the historical realities of his time" (33). Brigitte Bailey pinpoints the same relation of descriptions, epistemological concerns, and the historical context in her analysis of James's collection of travel essays in *English Hours* from 1905. She traces how James's "picturesque" descriptions of panoramic cityscapes give way to "impressionistic" partial ones parallel to the way his literary techniques change (Bailey 209). The appearance of architectural metaphors become meeting points of the aesthetic and the cultural in James's two texts.

## Architecture and experience in *The American Scene*

James embarked on his trip to the US in 1904 with plans to collect impressions of America (Edel viii). Anyone familiar with Jamesian parlance harks to the term "impression" as a basic term in James's intricate idea of imaginative understanding. Jamesian heroes go about collecting personal impressions that they will subsequently, in the course of thinking about them and trying to interpret them, transform into personal revelations about people and situations. James the author–hero seeks this kind of imaginative adventure during his travels: sites appeal to his imagination, impressions are collected and interpreted. Yet, revelations in the US, if there are any, concern the lack of subject matter, the fact that impressions do not trigger experience or the process of understanding in America. For James, the main reason of this lack of interest is American social uniformity.

Critics do not agree on interpreting James's venture in the US. For some it represents the inscription of traditional power relations. Focusing primarily on James's experience of blankness, Mark Seltzer and Sharon Cameron claim that his formalist rhetoric justifies imperialism (Seltzer 100, Cameron 17). For others, the Jamesian experience of the difficulty to

experience has its positive aesthetic value (Freedman 11), as asymmetries of social relations become a driving force for the pursuit of knowledge (Fluck 25). Karen Scherzinger maintains that wherever James experiences the blankness and emptiness of America, he is actually taking part in a liminal experience. Liminal, here, marks the in-between position where one is forced to reflect on the construction of impressions and to reconfigure observations to make sense of them. From this aspect, Strether in *The Ambassadors* is similar to James's persona in *The American Scene* (Posnock, "Affirming" 229-30; Scherzinger 170-71). Also, Ross Posnock values Jamesian experience in *The American Scene* as that which needs to reflect on its own vantage point and its shift, a basic plurality of experience. The observer forced to project meaning onto blank scenes imaginatively experiences a flow of the "I" position (*Trial* 107).

James's descriptions of cities and buildings in *The American Scene* provide rich material for analyzing his reaction and relation to American blankness. The social uniformity James encounters in the United States is epitomized for him by his experience of New York City. As Colm Tóibín rightly points out, "James's writings about New York disclose, more than anything, an anger, quite unlike any other anger in James, at what has been lost to him, what has been done, in the name of commerce and material progress, to a place he once knew" (53). His personal loss encoded in the New York experience, in turn, is best represented by his vision of the New York skyline and impression of specific buildings. At the outset, as he embarks in the harbor, he is repelled by the crude skyline dominated by skycrapers. He is shocked by the cruel demolition of old New York for the purposes of vertical spatial expansion. His first visual impressions show that the safe and vertically compact town of his childhood has been altered into a throbbing metropolis expanding vertically that represents for him the loss of memory and identity. That is why skyscrapers in general provoke James's hostility, as do their interior companion pieces, elevators.

Also, there is a series of specific buildings James describes whilst he articulates his impressions of the hard glittering surface of New York City. First and foremost, he is haunted by the Waldorf-Astoria hotel as an image of the American spirit. In the Waldorf Astoria, there are no separate functional spaces differentiated but a maze of doorless spaces opening into one another. There is no distinction of interior and exterior here as all rooms are open, public, exterior. Try as he might, the traveler can find no space where, behind closed doors, privacy would have its space, an interior needed for the cultivation of personal experience (167). The vertical mass



dominates over interior distinction. For James this building represents the American spirit of publicity, transparency, the lack of interior private space.

Apart from the justly famous Astoria impression, James also depicts the Tiffany Building in terms of interiors and exteriors, horizontal and vertical. The building is brand new, yet it appeals to James: he is happy this building has not turned out to be the skyscraper it could have been. Instead of Modern tastes, it adopts Classical style; its architect, Stanford White, was inspired by sixteenth-century Palazzo Grimani in Venice. The white marble mass on Fifth Avenue represents, for James, not a subservience to the past but a much needed link to it.

The New York Public Library, close to the Tiffany Building, was under construction during James's visit. The layout of the Public Library favors, again, the horizontal dimension, a possible refuge from the amplified verticality of the buildings around it. James comments: "Any building that, being beautiful, presents itself as seated rather than as standing, can do with your imagination what it will" (186). As Follini observed, another Jamesian favorite in the New York City wreckage is the Presbyterian Hospital. Here, again, the horizontal flourishes, outlines are muted, the whole place is still and refined. Ironically, this is an asylum that becomes James's mental asylum within the exuberant life of the progressing cityscape (Follini 44).

James's visual impressions include the New York City ghetto, where the tenement house serves as a counterpoint to the Jamesian imagination. During his visit to the Jewish quarter of the Lower East side, he sees the alien crowd of the quarter as sordid, squalid, centered on multiplication. Everyone seems to live out in the streets, the public space of the stores is cheap and vulgar, testifying to a new style of poverty, a poverty of loud exteriors. The tenement house becomes shown as a metaphor for life here: crowded, a façade covered by fire escapes as if the building was still under construction, a rented space for twenty-five families in one house, a space where interior differentiation of functions and social life is simply impossible (135). Only the interiors of the bars and cafés he visited bore some trace of civilization, but even there James locates the "unconscious impudence of the agency of future ravage" (138), poverty in a different guise. What James sees in the Jewish quarter represents an exterior surface difficult to penetrate and at the same time threatening to the observer (Kovács, "Rhetoric").

In general, through the descriptions of buildings in New York City, architecture becomes a metaphor for American life. The vertically oriented buildings with their open, functionally undifferentiated internal spaces that

become exteriorized and public represent the mass produced homogeneity of Modern America where imaginative experience has neither space nor subject.

## Architecture and experience in *The Ambassadors*

In *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether embarks on a mission similar to the persona of *The American Scene*: he tries to understand another culture as an alien through a series of revelatory experiences. The two texts similarly link these experiences to specific spaces in the cities, even to specific buildings. The main difference between the protagonists' experiences, however, lies in their attitude: while James criticizes and expects more, Strether learns about a life he had not had any inkling of before. Having a look at the architectural descriptions in *The Ambassadors* reveals the relation these attitudes have to one another: while James diagnoses the lack of interiors in America, in Paris there is a rich variety of sumptuous interiors opening up for Strether.

There is a series of spaces and buildings that critics traditionally link to Strether's imaginative experience. Strether comes to Paris to take young Chad Newsome back to his mother in the United States and a useful life in business, away from Paris and a life of loitering. Strether learns Chad has not been lost but has greatly improved socially, as far as his relation to others and the world and himself are concerned—a phenomenon to be understood since Strether himself knows very little about such "social" graces. This process of learning and understanding is usually linked to specific locations in Paris, such as when Strether observes Chad's balcony; the scene at the theater box in the *Theatre Française*, where Strether sees the new Chad first; then his vision of the French women and Mme Vionnet in the *Notre Dame*; his understanding of his missed chance in "life" in Gloriani's garden; and, last but not least, the scene by the river where he learns about the affair between Chad and Mme Vionnet.[1] If we look through these various scenes, their focus is, indeed, mainly on the psychic responses by Strether, the sites disappearing in the midst of personal impressions (Kovács, "Hybridity" 186-88).

In the balcony scene and in other, less exposed, scenes of the novel, architecture takes on a cultural significance. More specifically, the descriptions of the three apartments function as analogues for the process of understanding culture in terms of architectural space: first, Chad Newsome's; secondly, Maria Gostrey's, the ex-pat American lady's; and, thirdly, Mme Vionnet's. They function as analogues because the vertical-



horizontal, public-private, exterior-interior oppositions appear in them emphatically, the very aspects that have also been functional in James's descriptions in *The American Scene*.

The reader first encounters Chad through his apartment that symbolizes the value of privacy beyond Strether's reach. Chad's apartment on the Bd. Malesherbes, located on the Left bank, belongs to the Latin Quarter, where anything may happen to a young man, the center of the dangerous Paris lore as far as Americans are concerned. Yet Strether's impressions are far from threatening. Looking up at the third-floor balconies of the apartment, he realizes that wherever one paused in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it (69). Chad's apartment house is "high, broad, clear—it "springs" on him. Its "quality is produced by measure and balance, the fine relation of part to part and space to space . . . aided by the presence of ornament as positive as it was discreet, and by the complexion of the stone, a cold fair grey, warmed and polished a little by life" (69). In other words, the façade communicates a fair sense of balance, symmetry, and proportion to Strether. Furthermore, the balcony and the distinguished front testifies "to something that was up and up," something that lies "both materially and symbolically beyond his reach."

The appearance of Chad's friend on the balcony makes Strether compare the site and the young man to his own second rate hotel and his American companion Waymarsh. Strether dislikes the in-door chill of the hotel, the glass-roofed court and the slippery stairs, the absence of privacy, of domicile, of fireside as much as he dislikes Waymarsh the person. So he goes up to Chad's apartment with its promise of luxurious privacy. The place is charming, full of beautiful and valuable things, representative of a life "that can hold nothing better" as Strether puts it (74). Strether's famous subsequent reference to Bilham, his young American friend about not to miss life relates closely to the architectural representation of rich life in Chad's apartment. When Strether advises Bilham to "[l]ive all you can, it is a mistake not to" (131-32) in Gloriani's garden, by "living" he refers to his experience of life in Paris, testified to him best by his sense of life in the luxurious privacy of Chad's apartment.

The second building and apartment Strether surveys belongs to Maria Gostrey. Located in the Quartier Marboeuf, considered a modern and handsome section of Paris on the right bank between the Seine the Champs-Élysées in the 1900s, the apartment itself is a mezzanine, which in architecture denotes a storey of small height introduced between two lofty stories, or sometimes employed to allow the introduction of two stories

equal together in height to lofty rooms on the same floor. In Renaissance Italian palaces, the high-ceilinged floors of the front of the palace used to function as spaces of public entertainment, while in the back, lodged between high-ceilinged floors, the mezzanine used to host the private quarters of the inhabitants (Wharton 7-8). In Palladian villas, the mezzanine was a lower upper floor for servants and storage. Gostrey's place is not located in a villa, so most probably, as the word mezzanine is mainly used in English, it is situated in the back part of the house, between two high-ceilinged lofty floors of the front. The position of Gostrey's Paris apartment as the essentially private space within the house enhances the value the impression of the place has for Strether.

Gostrey's mezzanine apartment, Strether decides, is a nest. Strether here should find the boon he envisioned on Chad's stairs. The chambers are compact and crowded, almost dusky with accumulations. Gostrey's life is charged with possession: in the empire of things here Strether finds a temple. This apartment is the "innermost nook of the shrine colored brown, gold and purple that has a quality of rareness" (79-80). Rare and precious objects cram the space and create a circle warm with life. The interior space of the apartment represents the interior of interiors for Strether, a center that the observer again connects to his sense of life lived.

The third apartment surveyed by Strether represents not only interiority but also bears the mark of history. Mme. Vionnet's apartment in the Rue de Bellechasse is located at the Faubourg St.-Germain, across the river from the Tuileires where French artistocrats own the mansions. She occupies the first floor of an old house with access from an old clean court. "The court was large and open, full of revelations, for our friend, of the habit of privacy, the peace of intervals, the dignity of distances and approaches; the house, to his restless sense, was in the high homely style of an elder day . . . in the immemorial polish of the wide waxed staircase," and in the wood paneling, "the medallions, mouldings, mirrors, great clear spaces, of the grayish-white salon" inside (145).

Yet this space is different from Gostrey's in that the possessions are not numerous and collected but well spread out and inherited. At Mme Vionnet's, one finds traces of a different epoch of French history: in the prosperity of the First Empire and Napoleonic glamour Strether senses the presence of some dim luster that clings to the objects preserved from the past. These interiors and objects exhale an air of supreme respectability for Strether, which indeed comes as a surprise because he had expected to find the space of possible sin. So the impression of the place fits into the string



of Strether's impressions of French interiors instead of situating Vionnet as the adulteress in the American sense.

The three buildings and the respective apartments all represent interiors that invite interpretation, the work of the imagination. The interiors are found to be rich, dim, varied: to stand for something else, to represent. Chad's place is full of a promise of life at its best, Gostrey's is like a shrine, rich, colorful, warm with life, while Vionnet's building and salon reflect a historical awareness of the variety and value Chad and Gostrey created a sense of.

## Conclusion

In sum, while in *The American Scene* New York City and America represent a surface resistant to imaginative projection because of the lack of interior, in *The Ambassadors* Paris is the site where history and culture have produced architectural interiors inviting interpretation through their diversity and detail. These two cultural experiences, put together, enhance the cultural aspect of the imaginative adventure in *The Ambassadors* and also give an idea of the nature of that lack or emptiness James diagnoses in *The American Scene*.

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## Note

See Shloss 94-119 for an excellent survey of this.

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