

Henry James's *The Ambassadors* and the Christian Redemption Myth: "How

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Few contemporary Henry James scholars have shown much interest in advancing the analysis begun by an earlier generation of critics of religious elements and patterns in James's late fiction. Whereas some critics of that earlier generation wrote of James's "intense spiritual awareness" (Matthiessen 151) and analyzed the Swedenborgian patterns of the late novels (Anderson),¹ more recent scholars typically characterize James as an unflinchingly rigorous writer whose novels are filled with conundrums that anticipate not only modernists such as Woolf and Eliot but also postmodernists the likes of Pynchon and Barth. Such a characterization is embarrassed by James's own remarks regarding his religious beliefs, remarks that have long been dismissed or, more frequently, entirely overlooked. Understanding of the sacred in James has also been hindered in part by its having been too narrowly

¹Quentin Anderson argues that, although "it was a humanist's piety," James's was "a piety nonetheless, and it involved assertions about the nature of man not directly given in experience" (xii). More specifically, Anderson contends that the "emblems derived or borrowed from his father's [Swedenborgian] system of universal analogies must be identified for an understanding of *The*

defined by critics. A generation of post-Freudian thinkers, including Ernest Becker, Norman O. Brown, Erich Fromm, and Robert Jay Lifton, among others, has redefined the domain of the sacred. Beginning with the assumption that people have a universal, instinctual, and consuming desire to avoid “not so much extinction, as extinction *with insignificance*” (Becker *Escape* 4), they argue that people inevitably invest their lives in symbols which seem more enduring than themselves.² The realm of the sacred, then, includes not only those symbols traditionally understood to belong to the religious but any and all of the culturally sanctioned symbols by which people seek to assure themselves of their

²Becker lays out his argument for death transcendence as the universal human goal and the primary aim of all culture in two books remarkable both for their reach and clarity. The Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Denial of Death* (1973) explores death avoidance as a determining impulse in individual psychology. According to Becker, “each person nourishes his immortality in the ideology of self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance” (64). In *Escape from Evil* (1975) Becker expands his original thesis to show how these “immortality ideologies,” as shared by entire cultures, have shaped history since the earliest human communities. For Becker, culture itself is sacred to the extent that it supports people in their desire to outlast their physical selves. Becker was anticipated in this project by Norman O. Brown, who in *Life against Death* (1959) approaches history psychoanalytically, concluding flatly that “civilization is an attempt to overcome death” (341). No less comprehensively, Erich Fromm writes of humankind’s universal desire to “have not only some thought system, but also an object of devotion which gives meaning to . . . existence and to . . . position in the world” (66). In *The Life of the Self* (1970) Robert Jay Lifton concurs, arguing that one can simply say that to be an adult means to be fully embedded in the work held sacred by one’s culture: “The ultimate task of transformation is the recreation of the adult self. In significant degree an adult is one who has ceased to play and begun to work. . . . Adult work is the work of culture; everyday tasks are conducted under the guiding principles of culture’s assumptions about transcendence and are subservient to the prevailing modes of immortality. Each steel girder installed, each mile driven in a taxi, each product-order typed and approved contributes to a culture’s collective effort to cope with individual mortality through lasting enterprises, structures, and sequences” (147–48). James, no less than other artists, was not exempt from this need to “cope with his individual mortality” through his devotion to “lasting enterprises, structures, and sequences.”

lasting importance. Such a perspective reveals James as a writer who was not without convictions and who recognized, even if his present critics do not, that for him these convictions ultimately inhabited the realm of the sacred. James himself wrote of his discovery in later years that the conscious development of his own immortality strategy had been crucial to his happiness and emotional stability, a strategy which in his case consisted of a sustaining optimism regarding the immortality of the artistic consciousness, an optimism reflected in the fiction of “the Major Phase” and upon which James staked his sophisticated, but ultimately stable, moral framework. From this perspective, even the most seemingly secular of the late novels, *The Ambassadors* (1903), is revealed as a deeply religious work, one distinctly informed by the Christian mythos and in which James’s protagonist Lambert Strether expresses both his abiding faith and his moral indignation.

Such a claim, of course, challenges prevailing notions about James’s later novels as developed by poststructuralist critics over the last twenty-five years. In a 1995 essay on James’s *The American Scene* (1907), Ross Posnock takes aim at “[t]he canonized Henry James” who “has been and remains one of the most prestigious, indeed sacred, cultural icons on the altar of American high culture” (“Breaking” 25–26). By the time of these remarks, however, the “canonized” James had already been under attack for some time. Ten years earlier, after all, John Carlos Rowe summarized the now predominating view of “the postmodern James, who insists upon the groundlessness of all meaning and dramatizes such indeterminacy in his own fictive practice,” and who is ultimately “consumed by his own logic” (9). Although not all of these newer critics characterize James’s work in such radical terms, some, such as Posnock, Julie Rivkin, and Sheila Teahan, have long celebrated a supposed indeterminacy in James’s late work while steadily chipping away at the possibility that it contains any reliable moral categories.³ Critics who still want to argue for the existence of moral

³See, for example, Posnock’s *The Trial of Curiosity* (1991) in which he imagines James’s fiction as anticipating the postmodern pragmatism of Richard Rorty (223). According to Posnock, James champions “curiosity” and “nonidentity,” such that Strether’s triumph at the end of *The Ambassadors* consists of his hav-

categories in James's fiction find they must now, like Robert B. Pippin in his recent study, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (2000), begin by defending James's work against the charge of complete moral skepticism. And yet, how does one square the ostensible linguistic and moral abyss so many readers now find in the late novels with the warm, effusive, and highly principled author whom so many remember from those years—the James, for example, who befriended the dying Stephen Crane and aided his widow, who railed against American jingoism and sensational journalism, who visited soldiers in hospitals, and who adopted British citizenship to protest America's reluctance to participate in WWI? Surely, then, an approach defining the “sacred” or “religious” in broader terms and revealing James's discovery in later years that the conscious development of his own immortality strategy was crucial to his happiness, no matter how illusory such a strategy might ultimately prove to be, is in order. For the protagonists of his later fictions, as for James himself, what matters most is choosing the strategy that is least self-destructive and least harmful to others.

In *Henry James: The Major Phase* (1944), F. O. Matthiessen rightly

his self abandonment, that his self, unlike Chad's, resembles work that has been steadily unmade rather than made.” Strether's only commitment at this point is to “the incalculable and the inconclusive” (242), and his rejection of Maria Gostrey at novel's end marks his rejection of “ideal closure” (243). Like Posnock, Jeanne Campbell Reesman also finds Rortian pragmatism enacted in James's fictions. According to her, James shared Rorty's fear of “the dehumanizing idea that ‘there will be objectively true or false answers to every question we ask, so that human worth will consist in knowing truths’” (3).

Both Julie Rivkin and Sheila Teahan employ deconstructive strategies in order to show that, however much a postmodern pragmatist James might have been, his novels inevitably escape even his own best laid plans and meanings due to the indeterminacy of language itself. According to Rivkin, *The Ambassadors'* Mrs. Newsome “can almost be seen as a parody of the absent author who ‘works the whole thing out in advance’ only to find the scheme revised in the act of execution” (24). Likewise, Teahan finds that Strether “lands in the abyss of deviation and difference that is written into the novel's representational scheme” (104). Thus, his novel “enacts the very ‘subjective intermittence’ whose occurrence James denies, namely the epistemological and rhetorical instability of the center of consciousness which the

refers to James's "religion of consciousness" (131), and James himself understood his reverence for artistic consciousness in much the same terms. In 1890 he wrote to his brother William: "One must go one's way, and know what one's about and have a general plan and a private religion" (Edel *Letters* 3: 300). Not until 1900, however, did James begin to develop his "private religion" in earnest, and only in 1910 did he actually outline it in "Is There a Life after Death?" In it James declined to call his optimism about the immortality of his personal consciousness a "belief," but he explained that the "elasticity and affluence" of "the artistic consciousness . . . affect [him] as symptomatic and auspicious" (614). Having only discovered the seemingly infinite capacity of his own consciousness in his sixth and seventh decades, he wrote that to have then his consciousness suddenly extinguished would be to imagine "a prime originator" with "the wit of a sniggering little boy who makes his dog jump at a morsel only to whisk it away" (612). This argument echoes another letter penned to Norton seven years earlier: "It takes one whole life . . . for some persons . . . to learn how to live at all; which is absurd if there is not to be another in which to apply the lessons" (Edel *Letters* 4: 495). In the later essay James compares this evolution of his consciousness to that of a child learning to walk:

[T]he idea of an exclusively present world, with all its appearances wholly dependent on our physical outfit . . . shall have been not unlike the sustaining frame on little wheels that often encases growing infants, so that, dangling and shaking about in it, they may feel their assurance of walking increase and teach their small toes to know the ground. I like to think that we here, as to soul, dangle from the infinite and shake about in the universe; that this world and this conformation and these senses are our helpful and ingenious frame, amply provided with wheels and replete with the lesson for us of how to plant, spiritually, our feet. ("Is There a Life" 613)

Although he contends that the resemblance is only "superficial," James concedes that this conception of an evolving consciousness bears a "resemblance" to "the spiritual discipline" and to "the purification and

preparation on earth for heaven, of the orthodox theology,” but that only shows, he concludes, “how neatly extremes may sometimes meet” (613).

Certainly, James’s notion of his evolving consciousness as auspicious of a life after death has little in common with the traditional Christian attempt to conquer sin in order to gain entrance to heaven, and one can understand why James anxiously points out the superficial nature of the resemblance. James’s remark, however, should not distract one from the otherwise profound similarities between his private religion of consciousness and some basic Christian tenets. Courtney Johnson, Jr., correctly suggests that although James had chosen a road less traveled, his independent development of the idea that consciousness itself might be sacred is not so far removed from a more traditional religious faith:

By personal experience—by an experimental approach that can only be called *pragmatic*, James thus came to a view of epistemology that is well within the range of Christian Dogma. He arrived there, however, in his own private way, not through abstract doctrine, not through an inculcation of Judeo-Christian theology. (9)

As Johnson affirms, James’s faith in its essentials is still spiritual and religious. Although he did not claim to have absolute confidence in this “private religion,” he discovered that it buoyed him nevertheless.

The Ambassadors, with its seemingly thoroughly secular subject matter, indeed shows just how neatly the sacred and the profane sometimes meet in James’s late novels. Leon Edel is correct when he writes that *The Ambassadors* “spoke for the central myth of James’s life” (*Life* 2: 418). Even James recognized himself in its protagonist. In typically understated terms, he recommended *The Ambassadors* to his friend Jocelyn Persse and encouraged him to “try to like the poor old hero, in whom you will perhaps find a vague resemblance (though not facial!) to yours always” (Edel *Letters* 4: 286). This “hero” is at the outset of the novel a middle-aged pilgrim in search ostensibly of a wayward young man, but he knows that he searches for something else as well. Lambert Strether

at this point bears comparison to Dante's pilgrim, who in the middle of life's journey finds himself lost in a dark wood. Strether, however, finds himself not lost in a wood but in a "grey middle desert." Looking back, he speculates that "the backward picture had hung there, the long crooked course, grey in the shadow of his solitude" (61). The problem for Strether, as it is for Dante's pilgrim and for *Everyman* of the medieval play, is mortality itself. His "long crooked course" began when his wife died while still in her youth, followed by their son ten years later:

[Strether] had again and again made out for himself that he might have kept his little boy, his little dull boy who had died at school of rapid diphtheria, if he had not in those years so insanely given himself to merely missing the mother. It was the soreness of his remorse that the child had in all likelihood not really been dull—had been dull, as he had been banished and neglected, mainly because the father had been unwittingly selfish. . . . Had ever a man, he had finally fallen into the way of asking himself, lost so much and even done so much for so little. (61)

Out of his grief and anxiety Strether withdrew from life and from the risks of loving and so had allowed, if not caused, the death of his own "banished and neglected" son. As he now recognizes, his own story is a demonstration of the lesson that the failure to live breeds death, not only one's own figurative death in life, but even the real deaths of others.

As critics have pointed out, Strether arrives in Europe prepared to be transformed, even resurrected. Strether knows he wants to live and knows he has not, but he is not sure just how to do so. The first two-thirds of James's novel documents Strether's temptation and fall, as he repeatedly mistakes Paris for life. Charles Samuels accurately suggests that Strether responds to Europe with "a fervent desire to become worldly" and "goes over to the enemy" of European culture "before he even knows what it is like" (197). At first glance, Paris seems to Strether's eyes to bear all the marks of an immortal and immortalizing city. Its infinitude is suggested in the oft-quoted description of the city

as Strether first apprehends it:

It hung before him, the vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next. (64)

Strether falls into the trap that besets all those beguiled by worldly treasure; the jewel of Paris seems to him magically exempt from the limits of other material objects, at once “all surface” and “all depth,” immune in its brilliance and hardness to the effects of time and finitude.

Nowhere is the mirage of Paris more captivating for Strether than as exhibited in his first impressions of both Chad Newsome, the man whom he has come to save, and of Madame de Vionnet, the woman from whose clutches he is supposed to rescue Chad. Having dedicated their lives to high culture and good society, to Strether they appear to have reaped their rewards. Expecting to find Chad a debauched and fatuous youth, Strether discovers he has been “made over,” a process which seems to Strether to be “a specialty of Paris” (96). Paris has aged Chad, tamed him, civilized him, even turned him prematurely gray. Strether thinks to himself that if Chad is going to make him “feel young . . . then it would be because Chad was to feel old” (93). Age in this case, however, does not suggest to Strether mental decay. Chad’s transformation has only made him stronger, more handsome, more distinguished, and, finally, less vulnerable:

It had retouched his features, drawn them in a clearer line. It had cleared his eyes and settled his colour and polished his fine square teeth—the main ornament of his face; and at the same time it had given him a form and a surface, almost a design, it had toned his voice, established his accent, encouraged his smile to more play, and his other motions to less. (97)

However, just as Strether only half understands many of his discussions with the Parisian elite, he also only half sees Chad. Like the

jewel that is Paris, his polished surface entirely blinds Strether to Chad's utter lack of depth.

No one, meanwhile, does more to convince Strether of the life-giving property of Paris than Madame de Vionnet. Like Chad, she, too, has been preserved; she is "ten years older than Chad" but "ten years, also, if Strether liked, older than she looked" (137). On first meeting her, Strether views her as both Chad's creator and a creation of all Europe. The product of an English mother and French father "with a name one knew," she went to school in Geneva and spoke "French, English, German, Italian, anything one would" (138). Eventually, she settled in Paris. Not an American transplant like Chad, Madame de Vionnet is the genuine European article. When Strether first finds himself in her house, he thinks that the objects that adorn it seem miraculously unspoiled by the taint of getting and spending. He considers her collection in terms of religion and ancient magic. Unlike most people, she has acquired things "passively" by means of a "spell of transmission." Her objects are "relics" of a "private order" and a "special dignity." The age of her furnishings reflects not a degradation but their durability and their permanence: "Every-thing in fine made her immeasurably new, and nothing so new as the old house and the old objects" (146). The world of Madame de Vionnet's salon seems to Strether infinitely removed from the world of Woollett, Massachusetts, where factories produce articles so mundane that he is embarrassed even to mention them. He thus misapprehends the surface of Madame de Vionnet's world as all depth and mystery. Indeed, Madame de Vionnet is not, like Chad, utterly without real depths and mysteries, but these Strether does not perceive until nearly the end of the novel.

Strether travels to Paris with the aim of living more fully but without taking the risks that a full life requires, and this is precisely what he believes Chad and Madame de Vionnet have accomplished. Strether is sure that they love each other, thinks they may even be "in love," but also believes that through their Parisian sophistication they have managed to escape the sordidness and vulgarity that typically accompany the love affairs of mere mortals. Their passion, Strether convinces himself, is consummated only on a spiritual plane. Thus, it appears

to him that they have managed to live and to love more fully than he has himself but without taking the sordid risks of conventional lovers.

That sex and death are intricately connected in the novel becomes most clear in the scene at the French country inn. There the illusion that Strether has constructed quickly fades in the light of his ultimate realization about the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet. His house of glass cannot withstand the sordid banality of their adulterous affair. That Strether's most carefully maintained illusions should dissolve simply because he realizes that Chad and Madame de Vionnet have a sexual relationship is not surprising given, as Becker explains, man's universal and instinctual fear of sexuality:

Sex is of the body, and the body is of death. . . . When we say that sex and death are twins, we understand it on at least two levels. The first is philosophical-biological. Animals who procreate, die. . . . Nature conquers death not by creating eternal organisms but by making it possible for ephemeral ones to procreate. . . .

But now the rub for man. If sex is a fulfillment of his role as an animal in the species, it reminds him that he is nothing himself but a link in the chain of being, exchangeable with any other and completely expendable in himself. Sex represents, then, species consciousness and, as such, the defeat of individuality, of personality. . . . From the very beginning, then, the sexual act represents a double negation: by physical death and of distinctive personal gifts. The point is crucial because it explains why sexual taboos have been at the heart of human society since the very beginning. (*Denial* 162–63)

Becker also points out that all human cultures limit the perceived dangers of their own sexuality “by means of complex codes for sexual self-denial,” codes that “impose the cultural map for personal immortality over the animal body” (163). In this respect, Strether's beloved Parisian culture is no different from any other. Since the death of his wife, Strether has renounced passion and physical pleasure in an attempt to triumph over his own animal body. The complex maps offered to him by Parisian sophisticates, however, seem to offer the initiated a safe and secret route to bodily transcendence, one that sac-

rifices neither passion nor purity. The end of his dream about Madame de Vionnet and Chad means the death of his own “distinctive personal gifts.” If they are common, then he also is common, as, sadly, he learns, are both Chad and Madame de Vionnet.

If in the beginning of the novel Strether stands lost in the middle of life’s journey, he learns at the novel’s end a lesson not so different from that offered in Book One of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), where the poet describes Satan’s palace as made of gold. None, Milton warns, should “admire / That riches grow in Hell” (ll. 690–91), for even “the greatest Monuments of Fame / And Strength and Art are easily outdone / by Spirits reprobate” (ll. 696–97). The dissolution of Strether’s dream, the recognition that Paris, his own monument “of fame and strength and art,” is merely an earthly outgrowth, if not a hellish one, is immediately reflected in his darker vision of Paris. Having received a missive from Madame de Vionnet, he walks to the telegraph office, thinking now of all the conspiring women of Paris scribbling their messages: “The little prompt Paris women, arranging, pretexting goodness knew what, driving the dreadful needle-pointed public pen at the dreadful sand-strewn public table.” Their pens symbolize for Strether “something more acute in manners, more sinister in morals, more fierce in the national life” (315). The city that had once represented youth and new life now seems to him “more sinister,” “more fierce,” and more coarsely “public” (315). As he waits for Madame de Vionnet in her salon that evening, he finds that the house no longer speaks to him of past glories and luster preserved. Instead, he hears the noise of Paris through the windows and thinks that “[t]hus and so, on the eve of the great recorded dates, the days and nights of revolution, the sounds had come in, the omens, the beginnings broken out. They were the smell of revolution, the smell of the public temper—or perhaps simply the smell of blood” (317). What had once impressed Strether as being a great and glorious Parisian legend now smells to him most strongly of blood, violence, and death.

Strether sees the city anew because he has seen Madame de Vionnet and Chad in a different light. To put it most simply, he has come to see them as merely human. They are the products, he realizes, not of a great

and immortalizing culture but of a culture as ephemeral as any other and constructed by other ephemeral creatures like themselves. When Madame de Vionnet greets him in her parlor, she seems to Strether to be “dressed as for thunderous times,” and her clothing appears “so old-fashioned” that he thinks “Madame Roland must on the scaffold have worn something like it” (317). Now that he recognizes that she is as human and vulnerable as any other person, he suddenly perceives that there is a guillotine suspended above her head as well. When he visits her again a day later, the youthfulness in her appearance, which had once seemed so striking to him, has suddenly vanished; she is distinctly “older for him” and “visibly less exempt from the touch of time” (323). Her affair with Chad is only “the typical tale of Paris” (315), and he is amazed that even “the finest and subtlest creature” could be as “vulgarly troubled as a maidservant crying for her young man” (323). He could never before, he tells Miss Gostrey, have conceived of Madame de Vionnet as having been so “down in the dust” (331). Strether’s choice of words here is, of course, significant. She had once seemed so beautiful, graceful, and sophisticated that he had not before been able to conceive of her as either emerged from ashes or destined to return to them.

Even more dramatic than the shift in Strether’s perception of Madame de Vionnet is the change in his view of Chad. He feels like “a chill in the air” the degree to which Chad has exploited the woman who has so improved him:

She had but made Chad what he was—so why could she think that she had made him infinite? She had made him better, she had made him best, she had made him anything one would; but it came to our friend with supreme queerness that he was nonetheless only Chad. . . . The work, however admirable, was nevertheless of the strict human order, and in short it was marvelous that the companion of mere earthly joys, of comforts, aberrations, (however one classed them) within the common experience, should be so transcendently prized. (322)

In wondering how such a clever woman as Madame de Vionnet could so thoroughly delude herself, Strether by implication wonders how he

himself could have been so blind. Here more clearly than anywhere else, James articulates what Strether discovers through his long and twisting journey through Paris. He had come to the city hoping to recapture his youth and to save himself as well as Chad, and for a time believed that he had accomplished his purposes. When he uncovers the banal, adulterous affair, however, he finally understands that no civilization, no matter how old, sophisticated, or filled with artistic treasures, can save human beings from the essential fact of death. The spell of Paris having been broken, Strether sees that Chad is not so different from the young man he had been in Woollett, a person whom Chad himself now describes as having been "an awful ass" (337). Strether had thought that Chad's charm, taste, and sophistication would be wasted on Woollett, but on this last visit he feels that Woollett might be just the place for Chad after all. Chad has become for him as mundane as the unmentionable objects that Woollett produces. Strether finds him "marvelous" only to the degree that such a "companion of mere earthly joys . . . within the common experience" had been "so transcendently prized" by someone so fine as Madame de Vionnet. That he had so fooled Strether and that Strether was so willing to be fooled constitute the only miracle of "little Chad." "It was all," Strether now feels, "phantasmagoric" (331).

If, however, Strether looks around and discovers his personal paradise lost, or rather, that his paradise had never been paradise at all, he happens almost simultaneously upon an avenue to redemption, for along the way he has himself fallen in love with Madame de Vionnet, not as a symbol of spiritual perfection nor eternal youth but for herself, with the full recognition of her weakness for a shallow young American. In his last meetings with her Strether finally achieves the intimate connection with her that he has desired since their first meeting. No longer do they keep one another at a distance behind walls of deceit and self-delusion. Madame de Vionnet can freely express her real desperation to Strether because she both senses his strength and his no longer conditional acceptance. If his love for her is now unconditional and genuine, that fact also entails his recognition that her love for Chad is genuine and unconditional as well. It is, he realizes, both her

great weakness and her great virtue.

This discovery of love forms the foundation of Strether's moral authority at the end of *The Ambassadors*. Having been profoundly moved by the force of Madame de Vionnet's passion for Chad during their last conversation, Strether attempts to make sure of Chad, to make certain of his devotion to the "finest and subtlest creature" whom Strether has ever met (330). Unfortunately, Chad's assurance that he is committed to the woman who loves him so passionately is lukewarm at best. His pronouncement to Strether that he "is not a bit tired of her" and his reassurance that "She has never been anything [he] could call a burden" at best lack passion (337). Morally outraged, Strether vehemently accosts him: "You'll be a brute, you know—you'll be guilty of the last infamy—if you ever forsake her" (335). A few moments later, unconvinced by Chad's tepid avowals, he pleads again, "Let me accordingly appeal to you by all you hold sacred," reminding Chad once more that "You'd not only be, as I say, a brute; you'd be . . . a criminal of the deepest dye" (335–36). Thus, James illustrates in his fiction the truth he later enunciated more directly in his essay "Is There a Life after Death?": "how neatly extremes may sometimes meet." Strether's upbraiding Chad Newsome signals that, like the infant spirit training in a frame with wheels in the later essay, Strether has "taught his [own] small toes to know the ground," has begun to learn "how to plant, spiritually, his feet." Those who characterize the late James as a postmodern skeptic must therefore account for the fact that his protagonist in *The Ambassadors*, a protagonist with whom James himself identified, has not planted his feet on such morally shaky ground that he cannot distinguish between the "criminal" and the "sacred." Indeed, he sees the difference more surely than he ever has before, for he has not emerged where he began as the defender of ostensibly Christian Woollett pruderies; on the contrary, he argues that Chad's failure to continue his "illicit" affair would be the last infamy and nothing less than brutish.

The 1880s and 1890s had taught James much about the fragility of human life and the unreliability of art and artifacts. His mother and father had died. He had witnessed his sister's excruciating death from breast cancer. Robert Louis Stevenson, too, was gone, and Constance

Fenimore Woolson as well. The fame he sought had escaped him. He had been humiliated in the theater. What mattered finally, he came to realize, was love, and that realization was a liberating discovery that allowed him to develop his magnificent late style, which ironically was sure to earn little and to disappoint his critics. In "Is There a Life after Death?" James explains that the more he tried to live in his consciousness, the more he became aware of "sources" to which he owed "the apprehension of far more and far other combinations than observation and experience, in their ordinary sense, have given me the pattern of" (611). These sources carry James "beyond even any 'profoundest' observation of this world whatever, and any mortal adventure, and [refer] me to realizations I am condemned as yet but to dream of" (611).

Coming from Henry James, this is strikingly transcendental language, and in its light readers can understand Strether's final renunciation of Miss Gostrey's protection at the end of the novel. She offers to take care of him in his declining years, to surround him "softly," to "roof" him warmly, and he realizes that it must seem "awkward" and "almost stupid, not to seem to prize such things." He also knows, however, that he must refuse her in order "[t]o be right." Christlike, at least to the extent of his selfless love for Madame de Vionnet and his refusal to exploit Miss Gostrey's affections, he informs her that "his only logic is . . . [n]ot, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for [him]self" (344). Thus, he leaves Paris behind with little more than a steamer trunk and his "impressions" in tow, but readers must not make the mistake of underestimating the significance of such impressions for James. As Miss Gostrey suggests to Strether, "'with your wonderful impressions, you'll have got a great deal'" (344-45), an assessment with which Strether immediately concurs. At the opening of the novel, Strether can be counted among "the constant and vast majority" to whom James refers in his later essay as the sort who are unlikely to experience "a personal and differentiated life after" death because they have experienced "so little of one before" ("Is There a Life" 603). Strether returns to Woollett knowing that for the first time he has truly lived. To put Strether's journey into somewhat different terms, one can

say that he substitutes one immortality symbol for another. The key is to choose an illusion that allows one to live, to risk, and to love as much as possible without bringing more suffering into the world. Strether's faith in the immortalizing power of Paris fails him in each of these respects. Where he had once put his faith in Paris, he now relies upon his "impressions" and what can be made of them by his seemingly limitless consciousness, a realm auspicious of even greater expanses, a possibility that instills in him the fortitude to open himself to others and, paradoxically, to return to Woollett alone. Significantly, however, he returns to the wider world, rather than to Maria Gostrey's safe little house, because he knows the former is the best place for living, the best place for stretching one's consciousness and discovering still newer and greater relations and revelations.

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