

Chapter 4

Catalyst of experience: Place, Narrative and Biography in *The Ambassadors*

The relationship of place and fiction in *The Ambassadors* features a self-reflective structural prominence in the narrative economy of the novel. The place is conspicuously figured as the scene of a decisive turning point, a scene of recognition. We have encountered this narrative configuration already in *Confidence*, where Bernard, on a Norman beach, recognizes Angela among the bathers. Or, less pointed, in Brooke's surprising detections of his "Travelling Companion" in Italian places. In *The Ambassadors*, the process of recognition is the main theme which is structurally anchored in the protagonist of the novel, Lambert Strether, who as "center of consciousness" provides the reader's access to the story and its world. Recognition, in that novel, is the result of interpretation, and among the factors that determine interpretation the place is of eminent importance.

The epistemological relevance of the place is twofold:

- on a *paradigmatic* level it provides a type that helps – or provokes – Strether to interpret things in a way different from the Woollett frame of mind, and is, in that respect, the means to lead him "astray."
- On the *syntactic* level the place provides the dramatic device of staging the recognition as scene. Most obviously, this function is exemplified by being the scene of the chance encounter – as in the *anagnorisis* of melodrama in Brooks's analysis.¹

The two levels link up with each other in the role of the place as the significant object of perception that distinguishes the protagonist's "privacy" from his more social involvements. In these private situations, the place acts as the externalized equivalent to the protagonist's mental space in which he interprets his social affairs, providing the distance necessary for self-reflection – which the same scene, reverting to the literal, annuls in

1. PETER BROOKS, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. A different account of the configurational pattern is given in the term *peripeteia* by DAVID LODGE, 'Strether by the River', in: *Henry James, Critical Assessments: Vol. IV, Reading the Writing: Novels, Novellas and Stories*, Mountfield (UK): Helm Information Ltd, 1991. – chapter 204, p. 39; this term denotes the surprising reversal in the course of a story.

introducing some person or fact that belongs to the social problem. The metonymical dimension of place – joining the meaning to the contiguous – thus is a strategic switch in collapsing the symbolic space of reflexivity into the literal space of social encounters.

In *The Ambassadors*, the alternations of private musings and social intercourse constitute a process of change of consciousness. The place supplies the narrative motivation for the deviation from Strether's ambassadorial mission on which he is sent to Paris from Woollett, – or rather, for the gradual detachment from the Woollett frame of values. At the same time, it is the means to the growth of Strether's individuality, personality, and integrity by acting as the catalyst for aesthetic perception and involvement.

Paris is, of course, more than just the tourist attraction: it is a space of social intercourse, a matrix of social codes Strether is learning to decipher and master. But to revel in the perception of the *genius loci* becomes not only the metaphor of Strether's sensibility to European culture and values but, at the same time, establishes its foundation in character: in Strether's individuality modeled as the cultivation of biographical germs into flowers of aesthetic ecstasy; in Strether's personality based on an aesthetic sense for moral and social matters.

In the scenes focusing on Strether's privacy, the reader observes Strether's mind in a pure, self-reflexive form, being not so much occupied with decoding Strether's point of view from the dialogue, but reading Strether's mind in clear text. Events are narrated through the filter of Strether's mind as retrospective musings; the memory function (telling as remembering) puts the reader in a structurally analogous position to Strether's. Viewed as differential, this retrospective position establishes a here and now of Strether's emotional reactions to what he sees, hears, feels, and tastes; this redoubling of the denotative level on the structural level of the narrative formally reinforces the cultural codes of the aesthetic/touristic perception of place, in constituting individuality by retrospective autobiographization. In the close analysis we will specify more extensively the attributes of this individuality.

Touristic places in *The Ambassadors* are strategically placed in opposition to the "business" the protagonist has been sent to accomplish by Mrs Newsome, the mission to return Chad Newsome back to the Woollett firm. The places are the externalization, the motivation, and the scene of Strether's "double consciousness", which is defined in the second paragraph of the novel as "detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference."² Zeal and indifference are the attitudes determined by the "business", referring to the business itself and its other, "Europe" (The Place, as I am tempted to brand it). The qualifications of these attitudes, detachment with regard to the missionary task, and curiosity for that which deserves indifference, project the drama to come and the role of places in the novel.

The mentioning of the double consciousness, moreover, is motivated within a context of circumstantial delay in business. Strether's ambassadorial

2. HENRY JAMES, JR, *The Ambassadors*, London: Penguin, 1986, p. 56. All further references to this text are parenthesized in the text.

reenforcement, his old friend Waymarsh, is delayed, and Strether cherishes the delay like “a man who, elatedly finding in his pocket more money than usual, handles it a while and idly and pleasantly chinks it before addressing himself to the business of spending.” (56) The metaphor of money connotes business, and New England business at that, but it denotes Strether’s freedom *from* business, the “chink” becoming the metonymy for the use of business value for other, perverse purposes. As Strether’s freedom arises here from the conditions inhibiting the implementation of “his idea to begin business immediately” (109), as it is phrased when conditions have delayed the arrival of the American letters in Paris (motivating him to appreciate that place with the same leisure as the Chester of the second paragraph), these conditions are symptomatic of a double function of the place in *The Ambassadors*. It is at once, as providing delays and establishing an inertia with respect to the ambassadorial mission, a narrative or syntactic device providing a scene of gaps of realization and of chance encounters, as well as a paradigmatic device or vessel of meaning in its becoming the object of Strether’s “curiosity”. That the two functions of the place are linked intimately in the significance of the concept of “delay”, which translates also into “chance” as in “chance encounters”, or “the hand of fate” (279), is symptomatic of James’s construction of point of view: in the emulation of (Strether’s) consciousness as filtering agent of the narrative it repeats the very processes the reader uses to make sense of the text. We will return below to the significance of protentive retentions – the making sense of the things happening now from the perspective of a later interpretation – that has occupied many a James critic.

Strether’s basic problem is that the reason for his being chosen as ambassador, a certain cultivation and ability to appreciate values, turns out to be the source for his heresy from the values of Woollett and the end of his mission. His standing has been, of course, always dependent on his differing from Woollett’s canon of values as he didn’t match the business fixation of the male role assignment. Rather, he is attractive to Mrs. Newsome because of his divergence in this respect. His otherness however, for himself, is rather domesticated and reduced to the appearance of his name on the cover of Mrs. Newsome’s privately published political journal. Paris wakes Strether’s sensitivity from its Woollett hibernation in providing a favorable environment in which it can bud and grow.

Strether’s social sensibilities – the appreciation of European values, in talk, dress, manners – constitute the main plane of the differences: in this coded space Strether has to achieve his mission. But the place furnishes occasion for another plane, that of Strether’s inner life, of his conscience, consciousness, and aesthetic sensitivity, to provide the scene for the reflection of his social intercourse. This plane, then, is important for the registering of changes in Strether’s attitude and for the account of conflicts with the old values. As a site of the reflection of immediate perceptions it colors the account Strether gives to himself of his social relations. This individual, private side of Strether is staged in the perception of the touristic sights of Paris and the way they affect him.

In *The Ambassadors*, the cultural value of the place appears refracted through Strether’s consciousness. “Travelling Companions” relied on the

universal acceptance of the place as part of the value of high culture in order to set against it a domestic, sentimental ideal of love as empathy in suffering. In *Confidence*, the cultural value of the experience of the place, shared by the two lovers, was used to symptomatically point to the unconscious and misrecognized presence of love during the superficial phase of separation. In *The Ambassadors*, the value of the aesthetic experience is represented ironically, in Strether's reflection, as part of the meanings that he has to interpret and that guide his interpretations. The place provides, on the one hand, a space of experience countering and extending the Woollett frame of reference; while, on the other, its significance is dependent on its prior establishment in discourse and expectations raised. The meaning of the place establishes the specifics of its aesthetic experience that leads Strether's interpretation as individual and independent, i. e., in contradistinction to the Woollett frame. It sets for Strether a trap of viewing the world through the green spectacles of the tourist, thus being prone to take a cultural front side for the real thing. I will call this the pertinence of type. The efficiency of the touristic typology of places as common cultural background guiding both Strether and the reader is dependent on how the places are framed within the narrative. They are stepped into over a threshold that delimits the space of Strether's public actions as ambassador and the private space of his aesthetic experience and his thoughts. Strether's thoughts are acts of interpretation who cross the boundaries between cultures in correlation to his marginality or detachment, which is possible in just these delimited spaces of touristic suspension of the everyday; the framing of this private space is intimately linked to a distinctly biographical point of view, linking the aesthetic experience of the place to the constitution of modern individuality.

In the following I focus on two crucial turning points of the novel: the scene in Notre Dame cathedral and Strether's country side excursion. These scenes are the objects of the three analytical perspectives guiding the following sections: How are Strether's interpretations affected by the touristic typology of the places? How are the places functionalized for Strether's biographical concern? How do the places catalyze the novel's self-reflection on reading and textuality?

4.1 Type, Imagination, Interpretation

Strether's role as ambassador almost by definition requires the application of interpretation. He has to operationalize the situation in a way that allows him to complete his mission. Strether's difficulties in this respect result from the problem of assessing the situation appropriately. As indicated in the "double consciousness", his personal interest, his appreciation of European culture and manners (which makes him suited for the job) gets in the way of the straight representation of Woollett interests.³ Strether's shift in allegiance proceeds through the aesthetic appreciation of the touristic

3. The problems of ambassadorial representation are lucidly discussed in terms of supplementation by JULIE RIVKIN, 'The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*', *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 101 Oct (1986):5, pp. 819–831.

place which exerts an epistemological force in its embodiment of a type that, at the same time, guides and prevents (accurate) interpretation.

Epistemologically, type mediates between general categories and individual instances. An influential formulation has been provided by Kant in the 18th century in his notion of *schema*.⁴ As type and typified embody a semiotic relation between sign and referent, they constitute the precondition for interpretation and moral judgement. Because Strether's main activity, as ambassador and as individual in search of his identity, is interpretation, type and the typical frequently appear in the novel in the context of situations of bewilderment. Type, however, can be considered an aesthetic category, as well. It provides the form that allows to identify the object of aesthetic perception; as such, it functions as a frame, delimiting the special field of the aesthetic from the "ordinary" requiring social intervention.⁵

In this aesthetic respect type is most closely linked to tourism – as a matter of structural affinity as well as within the logic of the novel. When Strether in his private raptures enjoys the sights, he connects his expectations about the place (as a type) with the perceptual object as an instance of that type. We will see that this doesn't only pertain to the relation of the text to the scene (as in McCannell's relation of marker and sight) but also includes more general typifications of the aesthetic genre appropriate in the context – for instance, the historical romance and the pastoral. The epistemological and the aesthetic meaning of type are related to each other, and in *The Ambassadors* this relationship is dramatized and reflected in the textual strategies.

Historical Romance

We will now turn to a crucial scene in the novel to show how the typicalities of place are used to distinguish the narrative voice (respectively the reader) from Strether's consciousness that is the "reflector"⁶ or focalizing instance in the novel, and thus keep an ironic distance to Strether that allows for his development. In terms of the narrative progress of the novel, we take a look at Strether when he has already gained a sense and appreciation of the Paris scene, and begins to feel the contradiction between his own interests and those of Woollett. In the chapter after the speech to Little Bilham in the Gloriani garden, which was anticlimactic in the sense that Strether bemoans his being "too late" for a change of his life,⁷ Strether still takes care to evade Mme. de Vionnet as his antagonist in the Woollett frame of

4. For a discussion pertaining to literary studies see ALEXANDER GELLEY, *Narrative Crossings: Theory and Pragmatics of Prose Fiction*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987 (Chapter 2).
5. As proposed by PAUL B. ARMSTRONG, *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford*, Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 91.
6. As James calls his protagonists in HENRY JAMES, JR, 'Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*', in: *Literary Criticism*, Vol. 2, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984, p. 1298.
7. And not in Beidler's sense as the point of Strether's being most passive and inactive (PAUL G. BEIDLER, *Frames in James: The Tragic Muse, The Turn of the Screw, What Maisie Knew and The Ambassadors*, Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1993, *English Literary Studies* 59, p. 89).

things. That is evident at the beginning of Book Seven, chapter one, when Strether enters Notre Dame cathedral.

It wasn't the first time Strether had sat alone in the great dim church – still less was it the first of his giving himself up, so far as conditions permitted, to its beneficent action on his nerves. He had been to Notre Dame with Waymarsh, he had been there with Miss Gostrey, he had been there with Chad Newsome, and had found the place, even in company, such a refuge from the obsession of his problem that, with renewed pressure from that source, he had not unnaturally recurred to a remedy meeting the case, for the moment, so indirectly, no doubt, but so relievingly. (271)

He has been in the cathedral with almost everyone, except with Mme. de Vionnet. As Edward Engelberg has already noted, the cathedral becomes the turning point in Strether's relation to Mme. de Vionnet.⁸ It is true that, after the meeting in the cathedral, Strether gives up his reserve towards his antagonist, but for the reader, Strether's position is ambivalent at best. Mme. de Vionnet's intentions are still not transparent. That is largely an effect of how James stages the meeting of the two in the cathedral, and this is where *type* as mediator comes in.

The function of the cathedral, as indicated in the quote above, as a "refuge from the obsession of his problem" implies the exertion of Strether's imagination in a certain way, resembling itself an obsessive evasion of his "problem."

That was the cowardice, probably – to dodge them, to beg the question, not to deal with it in the hard outer light; but his own oblivions were too brief, too vain, to hurt any one but himself, and he had a vague and fanciful kindness for certain persons whom he met, figures of mystery and anxiety, and whom, with observation for his pastime, he ranked as those who were fleeing from justice. Justice was outside, in the hard light, and injustice too; but one was as absent as the other from the air of the long aisles and the brightness of the many altars. (272f)

The scene (of the cathedral) as refuge from the "hard outer light" – the tenor of the paragraph is Strether's coloring the other visitors in a motive similar to his own – sets the ground for the typological cast of his "observation", it establishes a discursive framework common to Strether and the strangers he observes. Later in the chapter (274), he thinks about the seventy volumes of Victor Hugo he has purchased, and that indicates the literary "source" for the type that guides Strether's imagination: one may suspect a reference to the tragic story of Esmeralda who seeks refuge in *Notre Dame de Paris*. These allusions are played high in the following passage.

He had the habit, in these contemplations, of watching a fellow visitant, here and there, from a respectable distance, remarking some note of behavior, of penitence, of prostration, of the absolved

8. EDWARD ENGELBERG, 'The Displaced Cathedral in Flaubert, James, Lawrence and Kafka', *Arcadia: Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, 21 (1986):3, pp. 253f.

relieved state; this was the manner in which his vague tenderness took its course [...] It had n't indeed so felt its responsibility as when on this occasion he suddenly measured the suggestive effect of a lady whose supreme stillness, in the shade of one of the chapels, he had two or three times noticed as he made, and made once more, his slow circuit. [...] She only sat and gazed before her, as he himself often sat; but she had placed herself, as he never did, within the focus of the shrine, and she had lost herself, he could easily see, as he would only have liked to do. She was not a wandering alien, keeping back more than she gave, but one of the familiar, the intimate, the fortunate, for whom these dealings had a method and a meaning. She reminded our friend – since it was the way of nine tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined – of some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written, renewing her courage, renewing her clearness, in splendidly-protected meditation. Her back, as she sat, was turned to him, but his impression absolutely required that she should be young and interesting, and she carried her head moreover, even in the sacred shade, with a discernible faith in herself, a kind of implied conviction of consistency, security, impunity. [...] All this was a good deal to have been denoted by a mere lurking figure who was nothing to him; [...] (273f)

The length of the quote may be justified by its explicitation of the crucial issues of Strether's typological framing. The objects of his observation are, at the beginning of the quote, in the plural, and Strether's being on a "slow circuit" suggests the effect of a wandering imagination. But soon he closes in, mirroring the paragraph's move towards its own concreteness of present (it starts with "one morning some dozen days after the dinner in the Boulevard Malesherbes"), changing from general, wandering observation to the concentration upon one woman, that is marked by its suggestive effect on his "vague tenderness" of imaginative empathy. Within the variables of the circuit, by repetition she becomes a constant.

Strether notes their commonness ("as he himself often sat"), establishing a bond of identification; which is qualified by the difference ("as he never did") that she in her behavior belongs to the place and he doesn't. The difference is foregrounded by the juxtaposition of wandering (Strether on his slow circuit), associated with "alien", against "the familiar, the intimate, the fortunate" embodied by the woman "within the focus of the shrine." While Strether is left identifying with strangers, his victim is fortunate enough to forget herself in the (authentic) meanings of the place. His principal lack, as observing subject compared to the observed object, is dressed in terms of literature. He casts her as the heroine of a drama, thus transforming the difference into the ontological gap between fiction and reality, in the difference between text and direct communication. He even imaginatively re-creates her (a double imaginative, as it were, "had he had a hand for drama"), and in this way James's fiction reflects back on itself.

The fictional fiction of Strether's imagination determines the type that governs the future relation between him and the woman; as "his impression absolutely required that she should be young and interesting" and as he

reads into the sight of her back all sorts of character properties, he creates a fictional persona that is at once ideal and fits the real. The indefiniteness of “some ... heroine” in “an old story” establishes a genericness equivalent to the missing individuality of the averted face, leaving the woman’s back to the projection of a type. As long as Strether can keep the observational distance, the realistic fiction he invented remains in the realm of fiction, of daydreaming, of hypothesizing, and can be understood in its therapeutic effect on Strether’s stressed mind.⁹ And on this meta-level of fictionality James sets off the collapse. The base of that level breaks down when Strether recognizes the woman as Mme. de Vionnet, which happens only after Strether had shifted his attention from the woman back to himself and his own situation.

He had dropped upon a seat halfway down the nave and, again in the museum mood, was trying with head thrown back and eyes aloft, to reconstitute a past, to reduce it in fact to the convenient terms of Victor Hugo, whom, a few days before, giving the rein for once in a way to the joy of life, he had purchased in seventy bound volumes, a miracle of cheapness, parted with, he was assured by the shopman, at the price of the red-and-gold alone. He looked, doubtless, while he played his eternal nippers over Gothic glooms, sufficiently rapt in reverence; but what his thought had finally bumped against was the question of where, among packed accumulations, so multiform a wedge would be able to enter. Were seventy volumes in red-and-gold to be perhaps what he should most substantially have to show at Woollett as the fruit of his mission? (274)

In the course of this passage another fictional threshold is crossed: the reality outside the cathedral reappears as fiction within the liminal space of the cathedral that had been coded as the place of imagination. The “museum mood” is here at once specified as a “reconstitution of the past,” in terms of fiction, that is, the fiction of Victor Hugo; and it is cast as an observable behavior, a “look”, a form that suggests a certain filling. The narrator waxes humorous (not just ironical)¹⁰ when he describes the look of Strether’s rapture in reverence by means of “his eternal nippers” playing “over Gothic gloom”, and in the “doubtless” echoes the position of Strether’s “impression [that] absolutely required that she should be young and interesting” when he phantasizes over the woman he observes. Strether is another object of visual reading here, but, as he is the center of consciousness, we quickly get acquainted with what is behind the look: the thoughts about how his latest purchase will fit into his baggage; the baggage, in the characteristically Jamesian double entendre, being his literal baggage and, figuratively, the mission he has shouldered.

So while Strether is outwardly rapt in the canonic discourse on Notre Dame (as in Victor Hugo’s gloomy Gothic fiction), inwardly his thoughts

9. We can recognize here, in hindsight, the position of the first-person narrator in the story “Travelling Companions”, who in turn reproduces that of the fictional “I” of the travel essay, in an imaginary identification of place and human object of desire: only Strether’s is motivated by autobiographical nostalgia rather than the semantics of love.

10. A distinction Watt makes in IAN WATT, ‘The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication’, *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (1960), pp. 250–274.

follow a path of association worthy of later portrayals of the stream of consciousness. The cathedral becomes the starting point to think of the literary associations, these attach to the name Victor Hugo, which in turn attaches to the seventy volumes, whose material extension becomes the subject of an imaginary overview over his baggage, which in turn reminds him of the travel from and to Woollett and the things he would “have to show” there. So, within the refuge from the realities of his ambassadorship his thoughts march from the realities of the cathedral into his ambassadorial conditions. It is to be noted, however, that this occupation with his position vis à vis Woollett happens in the safe place of a double framing – the path of associations through his baggage does not amount to a recrossing of the border between the refuge and that which he fled from. This double frame marks Strether’s thoughts as explicitly private, and in this capacity is related to James’s narrative strategy of making Strether the center of presentation: Strether’s perception and interpretation is what filters the narrative action for the reader, so the whole novel is, in this sense, from a private, personal perspective. In the Notre Dame scene, as well as in others, the (aesthetic) perception of place acts as an additional filter to mark the thoughts about his situation as “thoughts”, in the sense of a marked interiority.

In the scene at hand, the double framing around Strether’s ambassadorial mission accounts for the surprise effect in his recognition of the romantic woman as Mme de Vionnet. This happens in the sentence next to the passage cited above, which continues:

This was a possibility that held him a minute – held him till he happened to feel that some one, unnoticed, had approached him and paused. Turning, he saw that a lady stood there as for a greeting, and he sprang up as he next took her, securely, for Madame de Vionnet, who appeared to have recognized him as she passed near him on her way to the door. She checked, quickly and gaily, a certain confusion in him, came to meet it, turned it back, by an art of her own; the confusion having threatened him as he knew her for the person he had lately been observing. She was the lurking figure of the dim chapel; she had occupied him more than she guessed; but it came to him in time, luckily, that he need n’t tell her and that no harm, after all, had been done. (274f)

While Strether ponders about the fruits of his “giving rein for once in a way to the joy of life” with respect to Woollett, the person waiting for his recognition forces him to leave this frame and return to the cathedral proper.¹¹ However, the protecting frame of the cathedral is broken in a double sense; negatively by constriction, in that he is supposed to communicate with someone where he had the freedom just to perceive and imagine; and positively by the change of context, in that Mme de Vionnet is part of the business he has taken refuge from, and so marks the leaving of this frame as the return to the business.

The status of that business requires explanation. One could say, on the one hand, that the ambassadorial business has leaked into the cathedral –

11. The way Mme. de Vionnet slips into Strether’s awareness reminds us of the first encounter of Bernard and Angela in *Confidence*, see above p. 103.

which is, however, not really a surprise since Strether had been there with other business partners. On the other hand, the crossing of the frames is accompanied by a sense of confusion on Strether's part. That has a thematic reason as he notices the identity of an object of business and an object of romantic identification, which mixes different ontological levels (that of fiction and of reality) and different frames of existence (of his refuge and of his business). The other reason is on the level of the literary structuration of frames explained above: the identification mix-up is only one dimension of the confusion of levels; another one is the correspondence between most inner frame and outer frame (both deal with Strether's role in the ambassadorial business), which the surprise encounter can be said to leave in a "hanging" state; Strether's springing up is a symptom of the shock of collapsing ontological levels; the safe place as ground for his unguarded associations has been invaded by the reality he was content to imagine. Now, instead of questioning the reasons for Madame's presence in business terms, Strether, guiltily, puts his attention to the other confusion of levels, his romantic indulgence in her as object of identification. Being on guard with respect to his romantic associations with the woman, he remains unguarded in business matters.

What elopes Strether's attention by structural necessity is hinted at by the use of the romantic typification that the place engenders. When he follows his packing problems of the seventy-volume Hugo bargain, he himself outwardly looks like the romantic type, "rapt in reverence." What might have been the thoughts of the woman his outward appearance mirrors so closely, and whom he so obviously was content to take as a romantic shell for his projections?

The romantic bias will determine Strether's further communication with Mme. de Vionnet. He continues to read her appearance in terms of the praying woman as part of the historic scene, "as if she sat on her own ground", "completely in possession", but she also is "romantic for him far beyond what she could have guessed, and again he found his small comfort in the conviction that, subtle though she was, his impression must remain a secret from her." (275) Strether here keeps up the subject-object relation implied in his romantic view of her, clutching to the power position that this relation affords him, with a "small comfort". It doesn't remotely occur to him that he might be the object of manipulation. What the aim of such a manipulation might be will be readable in the next paragraph where Strether fuses his new romantic image of Mme. de Vionnet with the immediate business problem of her relation to Chad.

The moments had already, for that matter, drawn their deepest tinge from the special interest excited in him by his vision of his companion's identity with the person whose attitude before the glimmering altar had so impressed him. This attitude fitted admirably into the stand he had privately taken about her connexion with Chad on the last occasion of his seeing them together. It helped him to stick fast at the point he had then reached; it was there he had resolved that he would stick, and at no moment since had it seemed as easy to do so. Unassailably innocent was a relation that could make one of the parties to it so carry herself. (276)

Now Strether takes up the “business thread” again, in the form of the problem of the relationship between Mme. de Vionnet and Chad. In an earlier talk with Bilham the latter had called it a “virtuous attachment”, and although there have been indications of doubt as to what this “virtuous” might eventually mean, after the encounter in Notre Dame Strether interprets it as “unassailably innocent”. He merges his construction of the woman hero with Mme. de Vionnet, or, rather, identifies the image of the romantic woman, attached as it is to a perceptual and discursive space of the cathedral, with his prior conception of the virtuousness of her relationship with Chad.

For Strether, this establishes the basis for further intercourse with Mme. de Vionnet. He’ll have with her romantic talks about the place, that is, the Victor Hugo view on Notre Dame, he will feel “how at that instant he was plunging” (276), “plunging” connecting his seventy-volume adventure, so critical with respect to Woollett standards, to his romantic identification with Mme. de Vionnet, indicating the dangerous leaving of the Woollett frame. Strether will take her to a restaurant for lunch after Mme. de Vionnet had delayed him, as he “was impatient to get into the air” (276) – his impatience possibly signifying his sense of violated privacy, his wish to keep Notre Dame a safe haven. While they talk about Victor Hugo, his romantic imagination is further engaged in the interpretation of Mme. de Vionnet’s voice, “the light low quaver of her deference to the solemnity about them, seemed to make her words mean something that they didn’t mean openly.” (277) For Strether, there is an appeal to help, and he can’t help finding himself in the role of the romantic hero, as “a firm object – much as he might to his own sense appear at times to rock – he would do his best to *be* one.” (277, James’s emphasis.) The following lunch scene is carried by Strether’s sense of “letting himself go, of diving deep, Strether was to feel he had touched bottom.” (278)¹²

Strether’s interpretation is at once plausible, and critically marked as interpretation. The romantic-touristic discourse about the *genius loci*, the almost unmediated perception of the historical other, the lure of the romantic and authentic, bears one side of the ambivalence of which the other is the possible miscarrying of Strether’s interpretation. We have seen that Strether in his outward appearance of rapture in fact thinks about his baggage. The signs of Strether’s biased perception are too balanced as to suggest him being the victim of an intrigue; there remains an ambiguity that leaves the surprise about the real meaning of “virtuous” later in the novel as a dormant possibility. As a key scene, the Notre Dame encounter relies on the typological potential of place in order a) to narratively provide a scene for the surprise effect, and b) to reinforce the semantic and epistemological underpinnings of the narrative. As I have shown, the surprise effect is a result of the double framing of the protagonist in the touristic appreciation of Notre Dame, a framing which provides the boundaries that are crossed in the surprise encounter. The frames, in turn, rely on their coding as privacy, negatively in the absence from the “business”, positively in the establishment of aesthetic perception as actualizing biographical memory

12. On water imagery, touching bottom etc see LODGE, pp. 37f.

of previous literary (aesthetic) experience, thus establishing individuality as an autobiographical project. We will return to this aspect of the scene in the next section. Before, we will take a look at that other key scene of the novel where Strether meets a different type of touristic object: the pastoral, French rural landscape.

Pastoral Romance

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. (461)

On an excursion to the French countryside wholly on his own, Strether recognizes that the love-boat that completes his romantic river picture is occupied by Chad and Mme de Vionnet, and thus finds his notions shattered of their virtuous relationship. This scene has been frequently recognized as *the* turning point of the novel. Goetz, for instance, in reading *The Ambassadors* as James's struggle with his own autobiography, sees in the scene the final exposure of Strether's imaginary deceptions and thus his eventual abandonment to the reader's ridicule (after all, Woollett was right).¹³ That is the realistic interpretation, and it hints at the epistemological dimensions of type involved. Those are more technically addressed by the critics who describe the scene as *peripeteia* or recognition scene.¹⁴ The most explicit hermeneutic interpretation of this scene is in Armstrong's *Challenge of Bewilderment*, a title which already reflects the state of mind with which Strether has to grapple in the aftermath of the scene. Against the realistic view that interpretation and fact have clashed, Armstrong holds James's ambivalent championing of both monistic reality and pluralistic interpretation. One key word in Armstrong's description of the scene (following a quote of the passage quoted above) is *type*:

In a circular manner, Strether understands the individual here by relating it to a type, just as the addition of new particulars adjusts and fills out his sense of the whole. As the boat approaches in the next few sentences, part and whole continue to refine, extend, and mutually confirm each other. But suddenly, with the force of a gestalt shift, Strether realizes that the lady with the pink parasol and the coatless gentleman are Madame de Vionnet and Chad.¹⁵

13. WILLIAM R. GOETZ, *Henry James and the Darkest Abyss of Romance*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986, pp. 200–203 goes on to interpret this as a means for James's self-preservation by distancing himself from his protagonist that has come too near himself.

14. Peripeteia is Lodge's term (LODGE, pp. 25–43), recognition scene in RUTH BERNARD YEAZELL, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James*, Chicago/ILL: University of Chicago Press, 1976, pp. 21–25, echoing the melodramatic anagnorisis in BROOKS.

15. ARMSTRONG, p. 91

This is a description focusing on the epistemological groundwork of James's literary construction. The shock of recognition here is termed a "gestalt shift", which locates the effect within the premises of interpretation. Knowledge, in Armstrong's hermeneutic conceptualization, is generated by mutual adjustments of whole and particular, until the whole, as a filled-up gestalt, collapses into something else, a different gestalt. But what is that whole that becomes adjusted, what is the type that guides Strether's integration of the individual?

The type of the two lovers in the boat belongs to the pastoral landscape, as Paul Rosenzweig has shown in an interpretation of the novel as itself implementing a pastoral form.¹⁶ While this latter claim is sustainable with only great force, one can split the argument in two: that, on the one hand, the pastoral is the type referred to in this specific chapter, and that, on the other, the pastoral provides the paradigm of the function of Europe in the novel, i.e. establishes a place that is defined by aesthetics as opposed to Woollett that is cast as a social milieu. We will return to that relation of milieu and aesthetics in the act of biographical liberation below in the section on individuality. First, we will focus on the moment of the perceptual or gestalt shift of Strether's moment of recognition.¹⁷

The boat is something that has been "wanted in the picture", the picture here being a device reflecting the aesthetic function of the landscape and thus representing the type, the pastoral. The aesthetic function of the pastoral is explicit insofar as Strether chooses the landscape from the memory of a picture he has seen in a Boston gallery, and in this reference to a memorable, hitherto suppressed moment in his life, the aesthetic of the pastoral acquires a resonance in this chapter. Yet the biographical anchoring will be the object of the next section. Whether "the sexual has always been implicit in the scene, in the pastoral tradition in general – in its buds and its flowers", as Rosenzweig claims,¹⁸ whether Strether's sense of the aptness of a love couple derives from the iconography of the painted pastorals or from the literary sources, such as Maupassant whom James mentions,¹⁹ or if it is the continuation of the boat motive in Strether's perception of the landscape²⁰ that makes the boat on the river so significant, we cannot finally decide here. The relevance here is that the boat fully belongs to

16. PAUL ROSENZWEIG, 'James's 'Special-Green Vision': *The Ambassadors as Pastoral*', *Studies in the Novel (SNTS)*, 13 (1981):4, pp. 367–387.

17. "Perceptual shift" refers to Gelley's claim that "the perceptual act is displaced" in the scene (GELLEY, p. 25). What he means by that is the perceptual act is not linked per se to the aesthetic, and the point in case is that in Strether's recognition it shifts to the moral register. However, I think that Armstrong's location of the epistemological effect within the logic of interpretation is more sound and avoids the question if a "shift" from aesthetic to moral is possible on a similar level, as the term suggests, and what a moral "perception" would mean as opposed to moral judgement.

18. ROSENZWEIG, p. 378.

19. Strether, at the beginning of his walk in the country, imagines how he will return and on his way to the station talk to the carriage driver, who "would tell him what the French people were thinking, and remind him, as indeed the whole episode would incidentally do, of Maupassant." (454)

20. "Strether sat there, and, though hungry, felt at peace; the confidence that had so gathered for him deepened with the lap of the water, the ripple of the surface, the rustle of the reeds on the opposite bank, the faint diffused coolness and the slight rock of a couple of small boats attached to a rough landing-place hard by. [...] and though the rest of the

the aesthetic type and once its occupants are individually recognized, they do not “fit” anymore. Strether fails to adjust the individuals to the type, as he had succeeded with Mme. de Vionnet at Notre Dame, because the implication of the type itself (a sexually intimate relationship) and the individuals themselves (Chad’s “virtuous relation”) contradict each other.

The full force of the type can be grasped in the reconstruction of its establishment. The pastoral is, first of all, framed in a special way. As we have already mentioned, it is associated with a landscape picture that offers a literal frame as metaphor. But it is also framed in a temporal, narrative way in Strether’s provoking the appearance of the landscape by chance. This is how the chapter starts:

He had taken the train a few days after this from a station – as well as *to* a station – selected almost at random; such days, whatever should happen, were numbered, and he had gone forth under the impulse – artless enough, no doubt – to give the whole of one of them to that French ruralism, with its cool special green, into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the picture-frame. It had been as yet for the most part but a land of fancy for him – the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters; practically as distant as Greece, but practically also well-nigh as consecrated. Romance could weave itself, for Strether’s sense, out of elements mild enough; and even after what he had, as he felt, lately ‘been through’, he could thrill a little at the chance of seeing something somewhere that would remind him of a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before, at a Boston dealer’s and that he had quite absurdly never forgotten. (452)

Strether starts with a certain idea and a concrete desire. The idea is that of an aesthetic quality suggested by the “cool special green”, associated by the picture, that informs all the other instances that it characterized as background, medium, nursery. The desire is to jump the gap between text and reality, to make present what formerly has been “distant” and “sacred”. The way that presence is framed, the form it can take, is shaped by the prospective perception of the aesthetic quality. The significance of that experience is indicated in the “such days . . . were numbered” – we will further down investigate the biographical implications the passage carries. In this context of the typological logic of the pastoral it is relevant to note the private nature of experience Strether expects: the pastoral functions as a counter-type to the social complications of urban (or courteous) life.²¹ Since the pastoral landscape, especially in its staging as a picture viewed through a frame, is very self-consciously a symbol for (or epitome of) the whole European scene, which includes urban spaces as well (and historical spaces, like Mme. de Vionnet’s apartment or Notre Dame cathedral), the distinction is not so much between country and city, but rather between Woollett and Europe. Europe as pastoral scene takes on the mythical

village straggled away in the near quarter the view had an emptiness that made one of the boats suggestive. Such a river set one afloat almost before one could take up the oars – the idle play of which would be moreover the aid to the full impression.” 459f.

21. Cf. ROSENZWEIG, p. 369.

qualities of the *locus amoenus*, or partakes of the places equipped with a *genius loci*,²² which has been the source of the romantic performance of place and consequently the source of a certain kind of touristic practice.²³ That scene is framed as reality seen through the picture here, and it is staged as opposite to that other reality, the Woollett milieu.²⁴ Within the discourse of realism, and this is where James shares this discourse, milieu sets up a relation between place and character, where the latter is determined by the former. James, however, establishes place as aesthetic object in counterdistinction to milieu, he uses the aesthetic place as a utopian space for the characters to leave the restrictions of their home. We will show below the ensuing links to the semantics of individualism.²⁵ The opposition between France and Woollett is confirmed as being at Strether's back of mind when the narrator notes that "[i]t was a wonder, no doubt, that the taste of idleness for him should n't need more time to sweeten; but it had in fact taken the few previous days; it had been sweetening in truth ever since the retreat of the POCOcks." (453) The POCOcks here symbolize the rigid command of the Woollett milieu, which provides the position from which to call Strether's aesthetic activity as "idleness".

For Strether, the utopian potential of the aesthetic is realized when he finds the landscape identical to the remembered picture. That is indicated in the frame that ever recedes once he starts walking through the landscape.

His theory of his excursion was that he could alight anywhere — not nearer Paris than an hour's run — on catching a suggestion of the particular note required. It made its sign, the suggestion — weather, air, light, colour and his mood all favouring, at the end of some eighty minutes; the train pulled up just at the right spot, and he found himself getting out as securely as if to keep an appointment. It will be felt of him that he could amuse himself, at his age, with very small things if it be again noted that his appointment was only with a superseded Boston fashion. He had n't gone far without the quick confidence that it would be quite sufficiently kept. The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and the river — a river of which he did n't know, and did n't want to know, the name — fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them; the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right

22. For the critical appreciation of the romantic genius loci tradition, see GEOFFREY H. HARTMAN, 'Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry', in: *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essay 1958–1970*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970, pp. 206–230; GEOFFREY H. HARTMAN, 'Romantic Poetry and the Genius Loci', in: *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essay 1958–1970*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970, pp. 311–336.
23. What JOHN URRY, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, London: Sage, 1990 calls "romantic tourism".
24. The occidental lineage of the concept of milieu is traced by LEO SPITZER, 'Milieu and Ambiance', in: *Essays in Historical Semantics*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1968. — chapter 6, pp. 179–316.
25. Apart from the love stories analyzed above that make use of the foreign place as individualizing factor, one has to think of Hyacinth in *The Princess Casamassima* who returns from his tour to the Continent a different, educated person who feels estranged from his milieu. To resubstantialize that utopian aspect of Europe as James the author's disdain for the cultural backwardness of his American home milieu is tempting but not necessary. The structural opposition is backed up sufficiently by the semantics of the genre.

was grey; it was all there, in short — it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover, he was freely walking about in it. (453)

The framing of the scene marks off the pastoral space in the switch from railway, counting in minutes the distinctness of spot and appointment, to the perceptually defined space of color (preconceived in the configuration of “weather, air, light, colour and his mood”). The gilt frame, much as the “appointment”, marks a general frame which Strether leaves behind as a point of reference that increasingly becomes invisible (it disposes its enclosing lines) but remains invisibly present. As such invisible frame of reference, it provides the status of reality to the landscape in which Strether is walking.

The kept appointment, the magnetic matching of an imaginary image with a real sight, is staged as a shift from the realm of global time management, associated with the railways and one of the resources for a capitalist world economy, to the space of the nameless river.²⁶ That the river is called nameless and not the villages or other landscape features, marks it as all the more significant with respect to the boat that Strether will detect on it with the passenger whose names he knows all too well. In its namelessness the typical finds its most characteristic expression and opens, moreover, a contrast to the realism of milieu.²⁷ The nameless typical thus opens a space of correspondence between Strether’s inner life, his aesthetic perception, and the landscape. The support of the biographical correspondence performed by the line “it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet” anchors that type in the character. Ending that biographical time tunnel

26. The procedures of naming space, especially the semantically empty spaces of discovered lands, is critically reviewed by MICHEL DE CERTEAU, ‘Writing the Sea: Jules Verne’, in: *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, *Theory and History of Literature* 17. — chapter 9, pp. 137–149. Mapping space by naming it integrates it into the control system of the global conjunction of knowledge and power. The explicit withholding of names in the rural scene posits a space that eludes that network.

27. In HENRY JAMES, JR, ‘Preface to *Roderick Hudson*’, in: *Literary Criticism*, Vol. 2, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984, pp. 1044f, James criticizes himself for having named Roderick Hudson’s hometown after a real town Northampton Mass, because he wouldn’t, like Balzac, give a systematic account of that town’s society in particular, but only use that town as a type. That is, so to speak, a Jamesian notion of “milieu” that he owes to Balzac, and that is what the river is expressively not (it is not even, like Woollett, a phantasy name). If it were a problem that James chooses for other European places their real names instead, I’d argue that they are in themselves too much of (touristic, aesthetic) types to be misunderstood as a milieu. The reference to Maupassant in the chapter at hand, however, might explain why James does not want to use a name for the river: because Maupassant uses this landscape as a milieu. In this respect, Strether appreciates the milieu aesthetically and mirrors the reader of realistic fiction.

The Realist use of milieu is professed by James as early as 1879 in his biography of Hawthorne, where he champions the latter as a Realist *avant la lettre* in linking the local to the realistic, stating that “Hawthorne’s work savours thoroughly of the local soil — it is redolent of the social system in which he had his being.” HENRY JAMES, JR, ‘Hawthorne’, in: *Literary Criticism Vol 1: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984, p. 321. The relation of Realism and Local Color Fiction is elucidated in WINFRIED FLUCK, *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit: Der amerikanische Realismus 1865–1900*, München: Fink, 1992, *Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und der schönen Künste* 83, pp. 148ff.

by “Lambinet” echoes the description of the landscape as composition, thus implementing the pastoral type on the register of individual aesthetic perception. If one would want to call the aesthetic place, of which the pastoral is the epitome, a milieu as well, it would be an utopian, if not an imaginary, milieu, the milieu of desired individual fulfilment (“it was all there, in short — it was what he wanted”).

The difference to the Notre Dame type of historical romance is instructive for assessing the effect of the final collapse of the picture. While the characters in the scene are treated as aesthetic objects as well, they are not the points of identification or empathy. Rather, in the river scene it is the landscape, the river as medium of perception, that is the source of aesthetic feelings, and the characters in the boat are only “props” in the picture. They are not types themselves, but accessory to the main type, the pastoral. Within this type, they are not conceptualizable as individuals, like the romantic figure of Mme. de Vionnet in the cathedral scene. Within the logic of the pastoral type any recognition of individuals would constitute an embarrassment; that embarrassment is heightened, however, by the functional position such a loving couple inhabits the context: they cannot be but an intimate couple. The semantics of the pastoral type of perception, in recognition, then collides with the type of relation Strether thought Chad and Mme. de Vionnet to have.

But of course, if it were only for the typical, that might as well be an occasion for heightened amusement. But Strether, and the reader with Strether, feels as if the whole edifice of his new existence acquired in the chapter has collapsed. The Woollett view of things seemed to have been accurate — but why is that so bad, and why is Strether so intent on mending the rupture, finally privileging the beauty of Vionnet’s performance over the beauty of “truth”? This is where Strether’s notion of individuality as a liberation from the Woollett milieu gains shape in ever new biographical reconsideration. What Strether in the river scene (or rather, before the river scene) achieves is a writing of autobiography in the aesthetic space of the pastoral.

4.2 Biography and Individuality

Strether’s ambassadorial mission is an object of ambivalence, of a double consciousness. His official mission has to compete with his biographical self-interest, with the integration of the aesthetic stimuli into his conception of life. Strether’s speech to Little Bilham in the Gloriani garden has been regarded as the kernel of the novel, and the author’s notes push the textual reconstruction additionally in this direction. There is a tendency among critics to reinforce the biographical assessment of Henry James with Strether’s recognition that he has been too late to “live”. That is, however, taking an authorial statement for the intention, and the intention for the product. In fact, Strether has not finished with himself. Rather, in his private moments, he approaches what may be called a “redesign” of his life, late in his life. The climax of that redesign arrives in the river scene chapters, but he is working on it all through the novel.

As we have argued, the typology of place acts as a catalyst for the reconstruction of Strether's biography. His "too late" speech is a biographical bottom point, or point of departure; he blows up the glittering image of Gloriani in proportion to his dwarfed self. Later, in Chad's apartment, he detects Gloriani's conventionality, that is, his belonging to a type (Book 6, Chapter II). As long as Strether is on his guard, in the 'Ambassador Mode', he can recover from an error of judgment. In the Notre Dame chapter, however, which follows in the next book (7, Chapter I), he is not able to wrestle the type from the person; instead, as shown above, he identifies the person as the type. What exactly happens in this "identification" of the person as type? I argue that the identification implies a special personal involvement that overdetermines the image of the other. And this special personal involvement, in which biography functions as qualifier of type, has to do with the biographical significance of the type of the place, a special intensity of the memory of the act of reading, and its being embroiled in the semantics of individuality.

The narrative and semantic structure of Strether's typing of Mme. de Vionnet show their effects in the dimension of his biographical concern. Strether's typing is significant as an alternative to the initial typification he was sent to apply to whoever kept Chad from returning to Woollett: the bad seducer. When, in his last interview with Sarah, Strether, after having taken Mme. de Vionnet's tactical move to draw him into her boat graciously on the first occasion, tries in a last effort to convey his appreciation of Mme. de Vionnet's strong points to Sarah, the latter just sticks to her preconceptions. " 'What is your conduct,' she broke out as if to explain – 'what is your conduct but an outrage to women like *us*?' " (417) How did Strether, whom we got to know as a very conscientious character, get into such an aversive position to the women/woman who sent him?

Autobiographical Re-/Construction

Strether's already mentioned double consciousness hints at the answer to this question. If at the beginning the two parts of this double interest were quite equal, in the Notre Dame scene we witness the private part of Strether's consciousness beginning to dominate the business part.

Strether's changed position towards the Woollett women is the outcome of a process that has its origins in Woollett but is made possible by the change of scene. I consider the process of coming to privilege a set of values different from his milieu as a biographical, or even autobiographical process. It involves distancing himself from Woollett and seeing (his) life on a course that can be changed.²⁸ The change of the course does not imply a complete change of personality or even a change of values. Rather, it involves a different prioritizing and a different ordering of values, events and hierarchical positions. The place, Europe as an alternative "milieu", as a different social context stressing values different from those Woollett prizes, offers that possibility of re-hierarchization. However, since Strether's ambassadorial mission involves understanding the others' position in order

28. That is the function of the speech to Little Bilham in the Gloriani garden.

to effectively maintain his own and act in the spirit of Woollett, he is not free to just take up European views. He, at first, faces Mme. de Vionnet as the embodiment of European values that are bad. His task is to instrumentalize her in order to be an effective ambassador.

What we see evolving in the novel is the change of this position by means of the place as the catalyst of that change. The social level is supplemented by a private level on which the place can obtain this function. The private level is the level on which Strether can envision an alternative milieu to that of Woollett, in his aesthetic experience even realize it (privately). The significance of the typological transference in Notre Dame is that his private imaginings begin to infect the business, the social part, the most precarious part of which Mme. de Vionnet stands for. For this transference to gain weight and credibility, the private side has to be built up consistently. In this context of Strether's biographical concern the place takes a central position.

The place helps to isolate Strether as private, as separate from his mission, as the positive attraction to divert his attention from the business. That is the level on which Waymarsh, as the functional representative of Strether's allegiance to the Woollett spirit, is established as a private character himself who does not profess such a positive relation to the place (and lets this private failure influence the business as much as Strether does, when he takes sides with Sarah). That is the level on which Strether can trust non-Woollettians like Maria Gostrey, who is not chiefly involved in the business (but who turns out, later, to have been a schoolmate of Strether's main business antagonist, Mme. de Vionnet, and so providing another leak from the private to the business). Gostrey serves as Strether's guide, and that in an openly touristic sense. The touristic, then, is closely woven into the constitution of the private.²⁹

Once Strether gains experience and independence from Gostrey as guide, as he finds out about the places himself, these acquire a different private significance. His use of the places constitutes a shift in their relevance from an individual (private) confirmation of the cultural value (in aesthetic rapture, as together with Gostrey in Chester, London, Paris) to a more self-referential privacy in the concern with biographical reconstruction. The Notre Dame scene is the point where this shift begins to happen, and in the scene in the French countryside that biographical concern has become the center of the picture. We will then have to look at how the places are constituted as a private space, and then look at the semantic enrichment of the significance of the place by biographical connections.

Notre Dame: Imaginary Lack

As most of the places that are visited by Strether in private, Notre Dame serves as a refuge (see quote on on page 128). Strether's visit to the cathedral is motivated by an explicit urge to evade the beginning conflict in his

29. That is already established in the Chester chapter, where Gostrey and Strether enjoy the historical sights in contrast to Waymarsh who cannot share their enthusiasm.

loyalties that have been metaphorically pinned down in the “golden nail” Mme. de Vionnet has been described as driving into their relation.³⁰

This small struggle sprang not a little, in its way, from the same impulse that had now carried him across to Notre Dame; the impulse to let things be, to give them time to justify themselves or at least to pass. He was aware of having no errand in such a place but the desire not to be, for the hour, in certain other places; a sense of safety, of simplification, which each time he yielded to it he amused himself by thinking of as a private concession to cowardice. [...] He was tired, but he was n't plain – that was the pity and the trouble of it; he was able, however, to drop his problem at the door very much as if it had been the copper piece that he deposited, on the threshold, in the receptacle of the inveterate blind beggar. He trod the long dim nave, sat in the splendid choir, paused before the clustered chapels of the east end, and the mighty monument laid upon him its spell. He might have been a student under the charm of a museum – which was exactly what, in a foreign town, in the afternoon of life, he would have liked to be free to be. (272)

At the beginning of this second paragraph of the chapter, we see that Strether has learned to instrumentalize delay, and the means to protract the action is a change of scene, as the absence at one scene, which defines the function of the presence at the other. Let us not look negatively at the absence from the one scene, but positively at with what the scene fills the space of Strether's self, once it is emptied from those business matters which have dropped like a coin into the beggar's hat (money here figuring again as a tainted metaphor). Strether's absence is framed in a way that makes the sudden appearance of Mme. de Vionnet all the more surprising – and Strether's veering towards her even more plausible.

As we can read from the quotation, the framing relies on the constitution of Strether's privacy, or individuality, in the connection of the place and an autobiographical moment. It takes the form of filling the empty inner space by actions progressively less bodily defined (trod, sat, paused); the body movements act as a threshold in the crossing of the frame from the life of business to Strether's private life. As an extension of the symbolic action of dropping his “problem”, his moving about in the place, his holding it as object of his perceptions, constitute the place as at once discursively empty, and liminal. This liminal space is encoded as private in the double sense of aesthetic effect and autobiographical recasting. Once Strether pauses, he allows the place to act: “the mighty monument laid upon him its spell.” The passivity in bodily activity is complemented by a preponderance of the object, which registers as the mutuality of the aesthetic connection in “spell” and “charm”. Here the autobiographical element contributes to the definition of the liminal as private in the form of a fictional identification

30. In the party at Chad's after the Gloriani garden party, Strether can't avoid talking to Mme. de Vionnet. “In the very act of arranging with her for his independence he had [...] committed himself, and, with her subtlety sensitive on the spot to an advantage, she had driven in by a single word a little golden nail, the sharp intention of which he signally felt.” (260)

with the role of a student; the *genius loci* is represented in its provocation of an autobiographical phantasy.

The connection of “student” and “afternoon of his life” is still an echo of the speech Strether made in Book 5, at the Gloriani garden party; a speech James in various instances called the germ of the novel.³¹ In that speech Strether urges Little Bilham, the art student, to “live all you can,” implying that it is too late for himself to do so. This sense of an unbridgeable gap between the hopes of his earlier life and his current state after a life in Woollett still show through in the fictionalizing of himself as the student he still “would have liked to be free to be.” That self-imagination is associated with the specific aesthetics of the place. The student is phantasized in a museum, and Strether, in Notre Dame, is in the “museum mood” (274; see quote above on page 130).

Another role that Strether only partially fills out is linked to his being a “man of imagination”: that of writer or dramatist. His imaginations of the romantic woman (see quote above on p. 129) are cast as reminiscent of readings of fiction: “She reminded our friend – since it was the way of nine tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined – of some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written” (273). The reading of fiction is fictionally transformed into the possible writing of fiction, thus tentatively assigning Strether’s imaginative activity the status of a writer. Which is, then, a contrast to the status he had acquired in Woollett, as the editor of journal to which his only relation is his name on the cover, and not the production of its content. Between the imagination and the role is, however, the ruling gap of fiction and reality, so these phantasies connote the “too late” and perpetuate Strether’s self-conception in the continuity of Woollett reality. Only in the scene in the French country side Strether breaks that bond.

The River: Imaginary Closure

When Strether takes the train into the Paris *banlieue* he doesn’t have a point of destination in mind, at least not in the logic of trains. Rather, he leaves his destination to fate, which he invokes as the chance of finding a view similar to the one in his memory of a landscape picture (see quote above on 136). The break in normal causality corresponds to the break in biographical continuity: the aleatoric game Strether plays circumvents the order of means and end in leaving open if his sight will match his idea (although he trusts to it, as will be later revealed in the phrase “appointment kept”, see quote above on page 137); the picture as embodying a moment of irrational, irresponsible impulses wants to be connected to a present view, thus eliding the normal Woollett existence of Strether in the conjunction. The framing of the pastoral is thus not only a matter of the attributes of namelessness and

31. For a detailed discussion of the various conceptualizations see RICHARD A. HOCKS, ‘Multiple germs, metaphorical systems, and moral fluctuation in “The Ambassadors”’, in: *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power, and Ethics*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. – chapter 2, pp. 40–60.

aesthetic reference, but also one of the personal, biographical significance of the view.

As a paradoxical move, giving chance a chance establishes the frame in terms of choice of scene.³² James has Strether play an aleatorical game whose main tenor is absence of willfulness, a deliberate provocation of fate. Within this paradoxical structure the matching of frames – the oblong window of the picture-frame with the frame of the window of the railway carriage – is only obliquely aimed at. It might happen, it might not. If, however, the chances fall on the side of luck, we are prepared for it: this case is coded as “romance”, and overdetermined as fortune. There is another paradox here that requires explanation: although the romance is characterized as “mild”, the picture-frame is little, the Lambinet small, and the whole memory absurd – nonetheless, Strether expects a “thrill”. From the point of view of the narrator, the belittling of Strether’s thrills can be viewed as ironic self-reflexiveness of the narrative instance, the perspective of Strether’s consciousness. But from the point of view of the reader, the effect is a shifting of status in the narrative position: Strether steps into privacy or self-observation. This status is, as we might now gather, overdetermined by the established framework of randomness. Strether becomes a doubly private observer, that is, through the external framework of an aleatory field of perception, and through an ironic self-reflexivity.

Strether’s experience of the landscape between the picture frames and the landscape *in natura* is the experience of aesthetic beauty, which is that kernel of Strether’s prior existence that he is able to reconnect to his newly established self. This, after all, introduces a different kind of plot: Strether’s striving for a reconstruction of his self.

The little Lambinet abode with him as the picture he *would* have bought — the particular production that had made him for the moment overstep the modesty of nature. He was quite aware that if he were to see it again he should perhaps have a drop or a shock, and he never found himself wishing that the wheel of time would turn it up again, just as he had seen it in the maroon-coloured, sky-lighted inner shrine of Tremont street. It would be a different thing, however, to see the remembered mixture resolved back into its elements — to assist at the restoration to nature of the whole far-away hour: the dusty day in Boston, the background of the Fitchburg Depot, of the maroon-coloured sanctum, the special-green vision, the ridiculous price, the poplars, the willows, the rushes, the river, the sunny silvery sky, the shady woody horizon.
(452f)

The landscape scene is an extension and a symbolical reflection of Strether’s establishment of a new self in Paris, away from Woollett, on the basis of an aesthetic and not a religious morality, a self that has been a potential since he had left Paris in his youth to return. The picture becomes emblematic of this development and carries it on to its fulfilment. It is an object, but not in the sense of an object to possess. The Woollett conception of art, as things of possession, is implicitly rejected, although only by

32. For the following analysis, see quote on page 136.

Strether's hindsight. The difference is that as he then felt deprived of the opportunity to buy it, he now knows that buying it was not the important thing ("he never found himself wishing that the wheel of time would turn it up again"). The right thing was the experience that the picture provoked, that is what Strether remembers and wants to recover. This experience can be "restored to nature", it is not the picture, but the "far-away hour" which the passage transforms into the terms of a compatibility to the presence. Memory takes as its point of insistence the overstepping of the "modesty of nature." The overstepping as a reaction provoked by the picture is a mnemonic trace of a different world, which, for the memory, is the material trace of the impression left behind, and in the actuality of the other overstepping (that of the frame of the landscape) becomes coded as the future (possibility) turned into present (actuality). What then seemed improper, an experience marginalized as purely imaginary and phantastic, becomes the key of Strether's proper existence. This is a step further in biographical reconstruction from the Notre-Dame scene where he still imagined himself as someone he would like to be (a student, see on p. 143), implying an unbridgeable gap between now and then. In the country scene he changes into someone who he hadn't dared to be; he models his hopes from the past not on a role to play but on the actual, transgressive experience of a work of art.

On the level of description this relation between past and present is reflected in the list of "elements" that establishes a time tunnel, passing through ontological boundaries analogous to the reading of a fictional text. The Boston scene becomes narrowed down to the gallery, where the focus is further constricted to the attraction of the picture (its special green vision), which is followed by a retarding, self-reflexive moment in the consideration of its status as a possessible/non-possessible object (the ridiculous price), and then a further detailing of elements belonging not to the scene outside the frame of the picture but inside, ending in the general elements of sky and horizon that are the point of departure for Strether's search of its restoration in nature. The list, then, as the act of memory, constitutes the bridge between past and present *through* the picture; in the double sense of means and space. As means/object, it is the object of "restoration to nature;" as space/list, it constitutes the restoration in an imaginary movement "through" the picture. This "restoration" is declared as "a different thing," the movement of memory/presenting is hooked to an autobiographical signification, which, if one interprets "the rushes" as a double entendre referring not only to an element of the river landscape but also to the recurrent passionate urge (to buy the picture), associates the imaginary activity with a prevision (as re-vision) of hope: the hope for a realization of individuality that announces itself in impulses to "overstep the modesty of nature." Within the picture as object of memorial restoration, then, lies embedded another autobiography than Strether's: it is James's conception of a writer's life that is a stake in the re-production of a vision.³³

33. We may point to James's description of the change that the "dedication of life to an aesthetic use" may effect, mentioned in our chapter on "The Birthplace" (above p. 14).

But the landscape provides more than the sense of a distant past as the foundation of a new biography. It functions as a topological space for re-thinking and re-integrating the events during his stay in Paris into his newly conceived life. The landscape is not just a place for aesthetic perception, but a stage for flash-backs of scenes with Mme. de Vionnet that he subjects to the will of good faith; the place is thus functionalized as a means of reflection, analogous to the use of Notre Dame as refuge (see above p. 128).

For this had been all day at bottom the spell of the picture – that is was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky. The play and the characters had, without knowing it till now, peopled all his space for him, and it seemed somehow quite happy that they should offer themselves, in the conditions so supplied, with a kind of inevitability. It was as if the conditions made them not only inevitable, but so much more nearly natural and right as that they were at least easier, pleasanter to put up with.
(458)

Individuality

Let me recapitulate the significance of place in the *The Ambassadors* up to this point. On a symbolical level, Old Europe stands for a society based on aesthetic values rather than commercial. The difference that the aesthetic makes is in the values sustained by social intercourse but also in the sights of Europe as personal (aesthetic) experience. The semantic depth that is invoked by that experience reflects those two levels of the social/collective (treated above under the heading of the typical) and the individual (as thematized under the rubric of the biographical). The meaning of Europe is mediated through the immediate effect of the sight on the individual. It is, so to speak, an aesthetic milieu, the aesthetic as milieu; the individual and the environment (atmosphere) equal each other, they are assimilated.

If we assume that the tourist intends such an assimilation in visiting the sight, we recognize a self-referential structure: it is in the hope for assimilation that the tourist is drawn to the sight; but the sight is cast only in its functional potential for assimilation, that is, in self-fulfilling the prophecy. The process of visiting itself, however, engenders, as the excluded third, a parasitic effect, “reality” as “presence” at the place. That reality is, of course, outside the circle of the intended semantics. The structure of Strether’s chance encounter (hoping for the landscape to match the remembered picture) aims to implement this non-intentional effect intentionally. Thus, the country-side scene establishes a triple reality of the individual, as a reality of presence of non-intentional effect, and as reality in the correspondence of fiction to reality on the level of the picture become reality, as well as on the level of the autobiographic self-reflexiveness of individuality.

The foregrounding of the character’s individuality belongs, of course, in part to James’s literary strategy of making Strether’s consciousness the perspectivizing or focalizing center of the novel: the world seen through

Strether's eyes and mind is necessarily tinged. But there is a self-reflexive emphasis on individuality that is in excess of the conditions of that specific literary construction. We have seen that excess in Strether's setup of the chance encounter between his memory and reality, and since that has a landscape picture as its point of departure we can see the special definition of individuality against the social in the contrast of the social and the individual significance of painting.

The landscape picture of Strether's memory is preceded by another landscape picture in a different scene: not in the Boston gallery decades before, but in Chad's drawing room.

'He has wonderful taste, *notre jeune homme*': this was what Gloriani said to him on turning away from the inspection of a small picture suspended near the door of the room. The high celebrity in question had just come in, apparently in search of Mademoiselle de Vionnet, but while Strether had got up from beside her their fellow guest, with his eye sharply caught, had paused for a long look. The thing was a landscape, of no size, but of the French school, as our friend was glad to feel he knew, and also of a quality – which he liked to think he should also have guessed; its frame was large out of proportion to the canvas, and he had never seen a person look at anything, he thought, just as Gloriani, with his nose very near and quick movements of the head from side to side and bottom to top, examined this feature of Chad's collection. [...] Gloriani's smile, deeply Italian, he considered, and finely inscrutable, had had for him, during dinner, at which they were not neighbours, an indefinite greeting; but the quality in it was gone that had appeared on the other occasion to turn him inside out; it was as if even the momentary link supplied by the doubt between them had snapped. He was conscious now of the final reality, which was that there was n't so much a doubt as a difference altogether; all the more that over the difference the famous sculptor seemed to signal almost condolingly, yet oh how vacantly! as across some great flat sheet of water. He threw out the bridge of a charming hollow civility on which Strether would n't have trusted his own full weight a moment. That idea, even though but transient and perhaps belated, had performed the office of putting Strether more at his ease, ... (249f)

While the description of Gloriani's way of looking at the picture – with his nose and neck – obviously satirizes the great sculptor, it is not clear why Strether is more at ease after recognizing the sculptor's hollowness: is it because Gloriani can't live up to his reputation, or because he is so narcissistic that he is unaccessible, or because Gloriani self-consciously, as celebrity, belongs to a social sphere that Strether is not and cannot be part of?

Even if we cannot put forward a concluding answer, due to James's strategic or habitual, in any case characteristic, ambivalence, we can still point to the distinction manifest here. It is the difference between the aesthetic as a social system of values and aesthetic perception as an expression of individuality. If we compare Strether's simultaneous disappointment (the link had "snapped") and "ease" with his first sight of Gloriani, on the one hand, and the different landscape perception in the Country Scene, on

the other, we will get a more specific picture of the relevance of Strether's individuality.

When Strether is first introduced to Gloriani by Chad, his awe in face of the good society assembled in the garden amplifies to almost sublime dimensions.

This assault of images became for a moment, in the address of the distinguished sculptor, almost formidable: Gloriani showed him, in such perfect confidence, on Chad's introduction of him, a fine worn handsome face, a face that was like an open letter in a foreign tongue. With his genius in his eyes, his manners on his lips, his long career behind him and his honours and rewards all round, the great artist, in the course of a single sustained look and a few words of delight at receiving him, affected our friend as a dazzling prodigy of type. Strether had seen in museums – in the Luxembourg as well as, more reverently, later on, in the New York of the billionaires – the work of his hand; knowing too that after an earlier time in his native Rome he had migrated, in mid-career, to Paris, where, with a personal lustre almost violent, he shone in a constellation: all of which was more than enough to crown him, for his guest, with the light, with the romance, of glory. Strether, in contact with that element as he had never yet so intimately been, had the consciousness of opening to it, for the happy instant, all the windows of his mind, of letting this rather grey interior drink in for once the sun of a clime not marked in his old geography. (199)

Gloriani here is the object of aesthetic appreciation, “a dazzling prodigy of type.” Part of “the romance of glory” is the social definition of the Gloriani persona: the ingredients to that are his works in the museums (the expressions of the artist in the public institutionalization, his becoming part of a tradition which the museum functions as establishing), and the public nature of his biography, his career, as well as the association with other (unnamed) artists (“he shone in a constellation”). Strether, in Gloriani, encounters the embodiment of art as social institution and as source of his own aesthetic experiences (which lie behind his “reverence”). The sun that warms Strether's grey interior is precisely that embodiment: this person is himself the individual source of what he reverences, an individual who produced his aesthetic impressions – with “his”, I mean both Strether and Gloriani. In this manner, Gloriani is a tourist attraction of a particular kind: as a human he is able not only to represent the cultural discourses, like any tourist sight, but also to personalize them: and in this respect to embody the possibility of becoming the cultural body. That is, for instance, the basic structure behind the difference of Hollywood star and ordinary human we know so well today.

If we compare the Garden scene with the scene of Gloriani in Chad's drawing room, we can guess why Strether is relieved: after all, Gloriani is only a human being. We do not have to invoke the vampiric model of James's *The Sacred Fount* and state that Strether symbolically sucked the warmth out of Gloriani so that he appears vacant now; rather, we see that Strether the reader has turned the screw and now distinguishes the art system from the aesthetics of personality; the “open letter in a foreign

tongue” that was Gloriani’s face now turns into the familiar language of Strether’s judgement.

If we compare the aesthetics implied in Gloriani scene in Chad’s apartment with that of the landscape Strether visits on his excursion to the French countryside, we recognize that Strether, although he shares the value system of art, is distinct from it and individually defined by his distance to it. The landscape picture in Chad’s apartment is a “thing”, “of no size”, and with a frame “large out of proportion”; and as the latter qualification introduces the description of the grotesquely nosing Gloriani, I will assume that this refers to an attitude towards art that privileges the framing over the content, or the function of art as cultural capital over the aesthetic experience. It is against this “taste” as social convention that Strether’s enterprise in the French rural landscape is characterized as modest (see the quote above on page 137): “he could amuse himself, at his age, with very small things”, “his appointment was only with a superseded Boston fashion”; his impulse to go (see quote on p. 136) is “artless”, his romance consists “of elements mild enough”, and even his not having forgotten the picture is “absurd” only with respect to the “taste” embodied in Gloriani’s behavior. While the frame around the picture in Chad’s drawing room is rather inhibitive, the frame around the landscape Strether walks in is not restrictive at all, “the frame had drawn itself out for him, as much as you please; but that was just his luck.” (457)

That Strether can amuse himself “at his age” with very small things indicates the importance of the biographical backing of Strether’s deviation from the conventional aesthetics (it is, as the “superseded Boston fashion” signals, the ironic unconventionality of earlier, that is, reflected conventionality). This deviation is the kernel of Strether’s individuality, and it is cast in the form of the privacy in which his “amusement” takes place. Although Strether cannot leave the aesthetic system as such, he can make distinctions within it, and these distinctions constitute his individuality. The “private” here signifies the individual authenticity as opposed to the social conventionality, the “vacant” Gloriani’s “hollow civility”. Gloriani’s social conventionality serves, moreover, as a foil against which the perception, reception and interpretation of the landscape appears as expression of Strether’s individuality. The biographical backing provides a kind of contentual semantics for what Strether *does* in reading the place – and that applies to Notre Dame, to the countryside scene, as well as to a number of other places Strether visits in the novel.

As I read Strether’s encounters with Gloriani, the distinctive potential of Strether’s individuality is reassessed twice; first, it is defined as an opposition to Woollett in the aesthetic spectacle of Europe. Second, that spectacle itself is differentiated into social convention vs. individual experience. That pattern is not limited to the distinction between Gloriani as convention vs. the real landscape of the French country side; we see it also in Strether’s emancipation from his guides, Maria Gostrey and Chad, which shows itself first in an independent knowledge of Paris locations (the introductory paragraph of the Notre Dame chapter marking the transition, see quote above page 128), and also, prior to his specific excursion, in trips to other

places.³⁴ His independence is accompanied by an increasingly marked biographical concern, culminating in the country scene, as described above. There is a price Strether has to pay for his individuality, and that price is symptomatic of the modern individual in general. Although he has positioned himself against Woollett and made his peace with Europe (in the peace with Mme. de Vionnet) he returns to Woollett as alienated, homeless. It is the strength of James's conception that there is no place for a Strether who has had a glimpse of what it means to be an individual. For Strether, although he bases his new sense of a biography (a career) on aesthetic experience, the arts are not a career.

The ambivalent ending of the novel points to a notion of individuality that is not opposed to and transformed by socialization, as might be the case for novels of the earlier James.³⁵ Rather, his individuality is gained in distancing himself from Woollett, on the basis of aesthetic experience, as a new footing for social intercourse. That is not unproblematic, as the ambivalence of the ending indicates. Strether's sense of individuality is at odds with both the commercial system of Woollett and the art system as represented by Gloriani. It points to the condition of the individual in a differentiated society conceived by Luhmann: the individual as a "whole" is excluded from the functional subsystems of society; in communication it is addressed as person in functional respects only.³⁶

The "individual", in Luhmann's view, is himself based on self-referentiality, as are the social subsystems that are exclusive, of each other as well as of the individual, and coupled by communication which for Luhmann is the social of society. Aesthetic experience is one of the main ingredients of the semantics of the *subject* which has, for a long time, served as the social conceptualization of individuality. As subject, it had to bear both its own individuality and the definition of the social.³⁷ The exclusion of the individual from the functional subsystems of society results in more degrees of freedom but also more risk and new problems. One of these problems is that of identity, which in earlier times was linked to the placement of the individual in its segment or stratum of society. The identity of the individual is paradoxical: while its necessity is articulated by the social address

34. "He himself did what he had n't done before; he took two or three times whole days off – irrespective of others, of two or three taken with Miss Gostrey, two or three taken with little Bilham: he went to Chartres and cultivated, before the front of the cathedral, a general easy beatitude; he went to Fontainebleau and imagined himself on the way to Italy; he went to Rouen with a little handbag and inordinately spent the night." (313) One might remark here that Fontainebleau was as far as Sterne's *Sentimental Traveller* got on his way to Italy, and Rouen is a reminder of Flaubert's *Mme. Bovary*.
35. Cf. WINFRIED FLUCK, 'Das Individuum und die Macht der sozialen Beziehung: Henry James', in: *Geschichte und Vorgeschichte der modernen Subjektivität*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998, pp. 993–1019.
36. An historical outline of the semantics of individuality can be found in NIKLAS LUHMANN, 'Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus', in: *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft Band 3*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1993, pp. 149–259. A later discussion of the notion of subject as central semantic category in NIKLAS LUHMANN, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, pp. 1016ff. (Chapter XIII, "Escape into the Subject").
37. Luhmann traces the survival of this function of the subject up to Habermas' reinstatement of the subject as participant in rational communication, LUHMANN, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 1031.

(as “person”), the social itself is differentiated (into different functional contexts), hence not providing a coherent identity but disrupting it. The semantics of the subject, especially as aesthetically experiencing subject, has been one solution to that identity problem of individuality. The aesthetic, as distinguishing between the inside of the individual (his feelings and perceptions) and an outside (the social), constitutes the self-reflexive mechanism that provides a measure of autonomy for the individual.³⁸ Strether’s differing with the social subsystem of art (as represented by Gloriani) and the promotion of his individual, idiosyncratic, autobiographically overdetermined access to aesthetic experience can be viewed as the last remnant of that linkage of aesthetic experience and the subject.

But it is not only the constitution of the interiority of the subject that the aesthetic provides. Luhmann proposes that in the form of the novel, it provides the individual with patterns of individuality that he has but to copy.³⁹ One of the pertinent patterns, and one of the conspicuous features of *The Ambassadors* in Strether’s role as an observer, is the function of the observer; viewed as a pattern to copy, the second level observer is a paradoxical structure. Observing oneself observing (others, books) establishes a self-reflexivity which cannot be a copy in the sense of an original and its derivative but rather establishes an “independent” position. That is the operation the reader of the novel must “read” in a similar way to Strether, in copy/non-copy.

The fictional, moreover, is the means to observe motivations in a semantic register different from those of the prevalent economic or political ones, which are embedded in “reality,” but are only functionally specific (i.e., accord with the logic of the functional social subsystems of economy or politics).⁴⁰ Since, in a functionally differentiated society, an individual has to communicate with other individuals, being socially unlocateable (being both free and equal⁴¹), observing the others and supposing motivations becomes the only means for projecting future behavior, in a principally open future. But this does not only affect other individuals, it affects the relation of the individual to himself: his individuality is a reflection of the social institutionalization of individuality, he has to observe himself as individual as he observes the others. Literature, then, can provide a range of observable motivations that are not functionally bound to a social subsystem.

The provision of models of observation is one function of literature, then, for the individual. From the perspective of literature, this seems to imply the reader who reads for such models. That might count as a regression in the conceptualization of literature to a state of theory before, say, the New Critics, and certainly to a literature before Henry James. But the stress here is not on a moral, explicitly educational function, or other specific, socially (politically, economically, religiously) determined semantics, but

38. The notion of the subject but generalizes this interiority as reflecting the exteriority as well, in moral feelings and in reason, see LUHMANN, ‘Individuum, ...’, pp. 149–259.

39. LUHMANN, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, pp. 627, 871.

40. NIKLAS LUHMANN, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1999, suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 1303, pp. 1034f.

41. “Free” and “equal” are understood here as negative conditions, not rights. Free as excluded from functional subsystems, equal in exclusion.

to the operational task at the heart of individuality: observing oneself observing. That moreover, allows for a lot of semantic filling or functionalizing, and it does, as a model, not even restrict itself to the provision of different models of “motivation”. The consequence of that second-level observer position is the possibility of turning to the observation of observation “itself”, that is, to aesthetic experience. The self-reference of the aesthetic object models the self-reference of its observation. The perception of perception can be easily transformed into the “observation of observation”.⁴²

In *The Ambassadors*, I claim, the observation of observation as aesthetic experience provides the possibilities, for Strether, of observing new possibilities of motivation: this, however, not just directly in the aesthetic communion with the place, but also indirectly in how others observe him: he is not viewed in terms of economic motivations but for the aesthetic style of social intercourse, which he in turn appropriates as his own mode of observational relevance. We can see how the observation of others observing (oneself and others) effects the self-observation of the individual. Strether, in a sense, reads the others; as individual observers, but as well as a “text”, that is, as possible or impossible modes of observation; or as producing something to be observed. From this point of view, the novel is a staging of modern individuality: it develops reading as the principal social act, and fictionality as inherent in the commerce of individuals as second-level observers, observing self-referentially their own observing and, in external reference, others observing them and themselves.

Whereas James in his earlier works still sees unifying forces for the individual, first in a sentimental morality (as in “Travelling Companions”), then in cultural values (as in *Confidence*), in *The Ambassadors* these are put into a precarious position as always possibly deceptive and yet, in the aesthetic experience, individually “real”. This reality is hinged on the differential relation of text and sight, in constituting a biographical correspondence based on a repetition of reading.

4.3 Framing the Reading

As the novel develops through the point of view of Strether’s consciousness, the main “action” the reader encounters is Strether interpreting the world, other characters’ versions of the world, and himself. The reader reads Strether as a reader. Reading is reflected in the novel in those instances where Strether refers to his own readings *as* readings. We have encountered such a case above in Strether’s fantasizing about the woman in the cathedral which is explicitly linked to a writer’s or dramatists’s activity. While this open reference to reading as writing is stated in a biographically defective characterization (the conjunctive mode indicating that Strether is *not* a dramatist), in the aleatoric set-up of his country-side excursion Strether

42. See the second chapter of LUHMANN, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, “Die Beobachtung erster und die Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung” (“Observation of the first and observation of the second order”, pp. 92–164).

uses the literary-narrative device of the chance encounter upon himself, that is, he becomes writer and reader at the same time.

Strether's readings, moreover, in their correspondence to earlier readings, emphasize meaning over the mimetic relation of texts, as we have already seen above in the typological and biographical significance that the reading of the place acquires. For James, then, reading as writing is reading as an act of creation, or, in the constructivists' cognitive phrasing, of construction. It is reading as an imaginative activity that constitutes the meaning of a text (and not the "text itself"), but this constitution of meaning is derived from and based on the aesthetic experience the text provides.⁴³

James's framing of the self-reflexiveness of reading as private and individual points to the cultural history of reading, especially after the rise of the novel and its formative role of the constitution of modern subjectivity and individuality. It is on the background of this frame, or within its scope, that I want to frame the reading of literature as a cultural practice that frames tourism as its supplement.

Reflecting the Object of Reading

When Strether, in *Notre Dame*, is reminded by the woman of a "heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something, that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written," (273, see quote above under 4.1 on page 129), the scene is clearly staged in terms of fiction. It is the memory of reading fiction, assimilated into Strether's imaginative economy as something that "he might himself have written". The memory, then, refers less to a concrete object that is mimetically represented than to the meaning that has been actualized by Strether and that, "had he had a hand for drama", he might have himself produced, as an effect of literary strategies. That meaning, as at once being that of reader and writer, is, as we have seen above, both typological in terms of its concretization ("something" is quite vague as to what it specifically applies to, above in 4.1 on page 127) and biographical in terms of its relevance (above in 4.2 on 141). The typological, in terms of reading/writing, provides the "external", generic form for the imagining ("heroine"), while the biographical provides the internal direction of the actualization of meaning, the concretization of the type not in terms of its external individualization, but its development, its enrichment with meaning, its appropriation for the individual reader's/writer's concerns. In the case of Mme de Vionnet, she becomes the object of Strether's sympathetic empathy.

That "making sense" is what writing and reading have in common. Strether, in that scene, continues to read the woman, and I would like to fill up the ellipse in the quote on page 129 above after Strether's imputation of "a kind of implied conviction of consistency, security, impunity" in the woman:

43. That notion of the text as aesthetic experience is theoretically formulated by reception theory, especially WOLFGANG ISER, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, 4th edition. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994; WOLFGANG ISER, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre: Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 1101.

But what had such a woman come for if she had n't come to pray? Strether's reading of such matters was, it must be owned, confused; but he wondered if her attitude were some congruous fruit of absolution, of 'indulgence'. He knew but dimly what indulgence, in such a place, might mean, yet he had, as with a soft sweep, a vision of how it might indeed add to the zest of active rites. All this was a good deal to have been denoted by a mere lurking figure who was nothing to him; but, the last thing before leaving the church, he had the surprise of a still deeper quickening. (274)

Strether's question takes up the biographical as individual meaning in pointing to a motivation in the woman, as yet unclear, that resembles his own in the negative of "not having come to pray"; we know that Strether uses the church as a refuge – and a place to exercise his imagination. Characteristically, the motivation Strether comes up with is "indulgence", which the reader may conject to be something like the imaginary, literary activity the hero himself performs in the cathedral, and his indulgence in observing the church visitors. The "added zest" is in the romantic atmosphere of the place. It is that romanticism which links the woman and Strether in their aesthetic pursuit; Strether reads the woman like a reading; reading reflects itself in its object.

Reading/writing here constitutes as object a character, and that character serves as a model of the self, in that it represents the meaning of a reading; the meaning of (the reflected) reading is thus the constitution of an individual self. The relation of Strether to the woman mirrors the relation of the narrative voice to Strether, and thus the reader is confronted here with his own activity of reading Strether.

As the object of reading is made an object here, it may be appropriate that Strether is objectively marked as not really being a dramatist/writer; "had he had a hand for drama" is certainly a conjunctive which proposes another fictional level. In the country scene, however, Strether performs a literary strategy upon himself and thus becomes a writer.

Performing the Reflection of Reading

In the chapter on Strether's excursion, reading is thematized on different levels, as aesthetic experience, as deciphering the topological space of the picture, but also as the logic of framing and the literary play.

The picture derives its symbolic value from being an object of aesthetic experience, establishing a correspondence between the aesthetic experience of the picture and that of the landscape. More than in the biographical catalysis, demonstrated above in section 4.2, the picture as aesthetic experience points to the relevance of reading just demonstrated in Strether's readings of the heroine. Here, the effect of the aesthetic "reading" of the picture is not just a relatively inconsequential inner rapture, but rather an impulse to "overstep the modesty of nature" (see quote above on p. 144). This represents, of course, the kernel of the biographical significance for Strether, but it also serves as a model of what aesthetic experience can achieve. The urge to buy the picture, regardless of its forbidding expensiveness, figures the power of aesthetic experience and one way of integrating its

meaning into existence, which can encompass a change of horizon, outlook and course of life.⁴⁴ We will return to the reverberations with theories of reading in the last, concluding chapter.

More literally a reflection of reading in the Country scene is Strether's presence in the landscape as reader. Although he walks about it in "reality", his primary occupation during his stay is reading. He reads it like a picture, he uses it as a topological space to read his social relations into it, and he dreams in it. In fact, his whole wandering is a prolonged solitary reading, broken only by arranging his dinner with the landlady of the inn where he is to meet Mme. de Vionnet and Chad, but that is the end of the frame, or his privacy, anyway. His being alone reflects on reading as a private, prolonged immersion, modeled by the requirements of long novels, but also on the functions this kind of reading has for the modern individual. The biographical significance and the semantics of the individual, as analyzed above, are produced in the activity of reading.⁴⁵

Strether's reading of reality thus repeats the other movement, the reading of the picture in the Boston gallery. Here, he doesn't overstep the boundaries of the frame ("the frame had drawn itself out for him, as much as you please" (457)). The effect of his reading the real landscape is, significant of and signifying the biographical change, not the urge to leave his social standing but having arrived at a position from where he can integrate the various perspectives on his life. The change can be read from the different status of frame and framed. Inside the imaginary frame of the landscape as a self-presence, Strether is outside the social frame; in Boston, however, the aesthetic inside was linked to the framing of the picture, and the social limitations that frame implied. In the country scene the relations of picture and frame are reversed: the frame, as the interface and border of reality, becomes fictional in the realization of the picture as landscape. The effect of the landscape as reality is that it becomes a source of writing. Strether is able to write himself in the landscape (he gains a stabilized view of his social relations with its help) after having put the frame in its place: as a symbol of social restrictions that are themselves not nature but a social construction, and thus, one could say, a fiction.

In the selection of the aleatoric method, Strether on his excursion to the French country side mimics the literary device of the chance encounter, applying to himself what later is happening to him in his accidental meeting with Chad and Mme. de Vionnet in the same "scene." The aleatorics of the train ride (see quote above on p. 136) reflects the creative aspect of literary meaning in the dramatic setup itself – and not so much in the typological

44. The notion of the appropriation of literary meaning into one's life and existence I take here from ISER, *Der Akt des Lesens*.

45. For reading practices cf. IAN WATT, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957, p. 198, see also note 28 above on p. 64. The centrality of reading novels for the constitution of modern subjectivity and individuality is also highlighted in various systems-theoretical approaches to literature (most recent in OLIVER JAHRAUS, *Literatur als Medium: Sinnkonstitution und Subjekterfahrung zwischen Bewußtsein und Kommunikation*, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2003, OLIVER SILL, *Literatur in der funktional differenzierten Gesellschaft: systemtheoretische Perspektiven auf ein komplexes Phänomen*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2001) and society (LUHMANN, 'Individuum, ...', pp. 149–259).

functionality or biographical semantics. It is the dramatic, narratological aspect of writing that is thematized in performance.

Strether is at once writer and reader here: he generates an expectation semantically charged as biographically significant and typologically saturated. The aleatoric, accidental enables the position of a reader at the same time as the intentionality of a writer; it also points to the framing as the necessary condition for scenic effect. We use here James's double entendre of "scene": it is at once the narratological (dramatological) unit and the "background of fiction"; the latter being rather, in James's terminology of the prefaces, as the non-scenic: the picture.⁴⁶ And indeed, what Strether is after is literally a picture, which is as well the preparation of a *scene*, in the meaning of *picture/scene* presented in the preface to the New York edition. That *scene* is first the scene provoked with the aleatoric game of matching, that is, Strether's own biographical self-realization. But then, that *scene* is itself a preparation – a *picture*, then – to the scene where he meets Chad and Mme. de Vionnet in the boat on the river. While the self-reflexive closedness of the autobiographical scene frames that scene as an "image", it is all the more significant and surprising that its generating device is able to break that closedness; but it is exactly the accidental of the meeting as/in the scene that corresponds metaphorically/paradigmatically to Strether's aleatorics of framing – as well as contiguously/syntagmatically, as the boat belongs to that first scene as a key-stone. Aleatoric randomness enacts on the level of narrative action that which Strether has used to write himself, to make "it" happen as a drama: the significant change in his life.

That contiguous relation of Strether's self-framing and the surprise encounter warrants closer description. Strether's set-up – to hope that the windows of the train frame a picture that is like the frame of the landscape picture he saw in Boston – is that of a game: the rules are intentionally set and agreed upon, but the outcome is left to the course of the game. It is open if Strether finds the match. The moment the match seems most perfectly met – when the boat comes into sight as the scene's perfecting element – is at the same time the moment when the rules of the game seem to be forsaken. But that is not the case: the open-endedness of the set-up allows for just that to happen. Strether's set-up was for reality to take place, and the way it takes place is as the unforeseen. From this point of view, it is rather surprising that the surprise of the encounter surprises. But that is, of course, due to the other element in the game: the picture and its biographical and typological significance which itself is made to frame the game, at least for a while. It closes within its frames the openness of the game. The closed system of the picture, however, had gained its naturalized state of reality only by Strether's "trick": the intentional setting-up of non-intentionality. That, the accidental, provided the charm of the picture – but also the possibility of its destruction. At work are the cocks and wheels

46. In the Prefaces to the New York Edition of *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Ambassadors*; JAMES, 'Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*', p. 1296; HENRY JAMES, JR, 'Preface to the New York Edition: *The Ambassadors*', in: *Literary Criticism*, Vol. 2, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984, pp. 1317ff. That is the vocabulary Anderson refers to in his analysis of the scenic in James, in CHARLES R. ANDERSON, *Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977.

of the writer's technique which aims at making the incredible probable and the foreseeable a surprise.

Supplementing the Reading: Tourism

We have shown in this chapter that the typological, for Strether, is not something he tries to live in (as one would suppose Mme Bovary to do) but rather is a means of recognition; that is why it is best described as a typology rather than a genre (of the romantic/melodramatic, the pastoral), although the latter term is certainly the right category to relate the types to the sorts of texts they derive from. The type is experienced by Strether not as "real life" – which in the novel is instantiated by his social intercourse with the different parties involved in his ambassadorial mission – but in the scope of his individual, private, aesthetic experience. The frame of the picture in the Lambinet chapter is the emblem of this status of the type: although Strether's experience is as lively as if the the aesthetic production had become real life, without the frame the experience would neither be aesthetic nor a gain of insight.

The hero does not become part of the pastoral scene but perceives it aesthetically. He experiences the pastoral landscape, the rural idyll, literally as a picture. That includes the love couple in the boat which is a part of the aesthetic furniture, although a special one, of the landscape, and not an index of how Strether himself lives as a pastoralist (as would Rousseau).

The lovers are a special implement because they represent the harmony and unity that Strether feels with himself and with the landscape. As he recognizes who they are, the relation of signifier and signified in that representation turn ironic the moment they signal their identity. The pastoral aesthetically adequates the harmonized reconstruction of the relation between Vionnet and Chad – but their embodying pastoral lovers signifies the fact upon whose absence Strether's harmonious reconstruction had built. The power this narrative turning point draws on this negation of the form by its concretization.

The typological setup serves to contain both aesthetic experience and the biographical within the same frame. It delimits the space of social intercourse from that of individual self-reflection and self-experience. That becomes most perspicuous when the frame implodes in the recognition scene and its sudden absence denotes Strether's missing sense of a position. Only when he afterwards reflects on it, trying to re-frame it, his deliberations become representable again for the narrator's perspective; this narrative move effects the representation of the ordering capacity of the aesthetic frame, at once establishing order and disorder in representation; disorder is represented in the act of being replaced by order, as the effect of an ordering activity. Ironically, the way Strether achieves this reordering is by casting Mme de Vionnet's behavior in terms of fiction, as the "beautiful lie". Saving her beauty of execution against her possibly deceptive interests, Strether saves himself in taking the position of a reader of fiction and not as a victim of a social intrigue.

The frame, then, is the border of two ontologically different spaces: the social/real world and the world of the picture/fiction. How these two

worlds are connected is crucial, since that point functionally constitutes both their division and their coexistence. The fictional space has, on the one hand, a heuristic/hermeneutic function – it serves as a repository for hypotheses about the world and possible modes of configuration;⁴⁷ on the other hand, it is semantically constrained by Strether's concern for his individuality: it thus reflects the social function of the practice of reading contemporary with James and still with us. The semantic restriction to individuality doesn't mean that there isn't any social communication: to the contrary. The social communication constitutes the main problem of the novel, but it is only solvable on the basis of mediation by Strether's individuality.

The frame in the Lambinet chapter is, accordingly, introduced as a hypothesis of a private nature. The truth of the hypothesis is turned into narrative as the condition of the match between the picture and the real place. But rather more important than the outcome is the risking of the play itself: that is at once the precondition and the result of the individuality intended. *Precondition* of individuality: the hypothetical domain of fiction engenders an observer position independent of socially functional points of view that are not able to integrate the individual as such; Woollett does attempt to reduce Strether's standing to his success in their mission – which is determined by the logic of economic success –, but Strether's compatibility to Paris, the very reason for the reasonableness of choosing him as ambassador, prevents that reduction logically. But the very aesthetic sensibility prevents his full integration into the Paris society as well, as we have tried to show in Strether's exemplary relation to Gloriani. Instead, the individuality of the aesthetic experience, especially of the place, in its dependence on prior (aesthetic, personal) experience, establishes aesthetic experience as the space of individual creation and re-creation: *result* of individuality.

The picture frame in the Lambinet chapter is thus emblematic in yet another sense: of the supplementary structure of the frame as parergon, as analyzed by Derrida.⁴⁸ Ontologically, the frame is partaking of both domains: from the outside, it belongs to what it frames, since it delimits the work of art from the wall. From the inside, it doesn't belong to the work proper (the painting, in both Derrida's treatment of Kant's aesthetics and in the Lambinet chapter of *The Ambassadors*) and thus belongs to the outside. As an emblem of reading, the frame symbolizes the distancing operation effected in the reading of fiction. If our proposition of the function of fiction as constitutive of individuality is correct, and the "inner" reality is constituted by a mapping of ontological difference onto the

47. This is where both Ricoeur's phenomenological assessment of the function as fiction as providing narrative configuration (PAUL RICOEUR, *Le temps raconté*, Volume 3, *Temps et récit*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985) and Pavel's functional relationing of fictional and actual ontologies (THOMAS G. PAVEL, *Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge/Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986) are applicable. The latter's analysis of tragedy as a non- or post-mythical relation in hypothesizing constraints for decisions and actions is a promising beginning; certainly, the novel as a genre has different parameters, especially in view of the constructivist proposition of its function as providing a second-level observer position for the individual.

48. JACQUES DERRIDA, GEOFF BENNINGTON and IAN MCLEOD, *The Truth in Painting*, Chicago/ILL: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

topology of outside/social and inside/individual, what then would the frame be? As Derrida claims, the frame does not exist (as it partakes of two ontological levels at once, but always of the other, thus not existing on either) – so James’s frame symbolizes its own non-existence (in the fulfilment of Strether’s aesthetic procrastinations it is ever receding, only thinkable from the “other” point of view, that of metaphorical framing); when Strether recognizes the central element of the framed picture, the couple in the boat, the frame folds itself into itself and vanishes;⁴⁹ the couple as key of the pastoral, moreover, can be seen as an instance of the simultaneity of inside and outside, if one views it as the center of a structure (the pastoral structure) in Derrida’s sense of a closed structure that has its central, defining point always outside itself.⁵⁰ James’s setup, then, would be symbolic of the iterativity of *différance* that is also the mark of the supplement.

That supplementarity may be taken as the clue for returning to the place in fiction. What if the relation of the background of fiction and the fiction was one of supplementarity? The place, as the background of fiction, appears in the fiction and belongs to it – the tourist, however, is a witness to the difference between the background and the fiction. The background of fiction: is it part of the narrative meaning or does it serve a subservient function, as a mere background? Is the background of fiction the trace of the real, making the fictional world a “world”, not belonging to the sense and meaning of the fiction, not being transcendable in giving the aesthetic experience of reading an existential meaning, thus remaining as a trace behind? We will indicate the direction an answer would have to take in our concluding chapter.

49. Within the deconstructive vocabulary that would also be called “invagination”, but we will not venture here any further into that territory. See JONATHAN CULLER, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 198.
50. JACQUES DERRIDA, ‘La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines’, in: *L’écriture et la différence*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967, points 100, pp. 409–428. Derrida’s point is that this status initiates a game or play, which links up nicely with the game character of Strether’s aleatorics.

