CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

1

Introduction: *The Portrait of a Lady* and "Felt Life"

JOEL PORTE

I

AMONG those novels of the nineteenth century which continue to be read and discussed as models of fictive craft and as major contributions to humanity's comprehension of itself, *The Portrait of a Lady* stands out for the complexity of its chief character, the compelling nature of its story, the density of its range of cultural reference, and the artfulness of its conception and execution. Like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Middlemarch*, it focuses on the question of a woman's destiny and the conditions and consequences of modern marriage. But, like *The Scarlet Letter*, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, *A Modern Instance*, and *The Awakening*, it places those pressing issues in a specifically – indeed, uniquely – American context, in that international context of Americans returning to the Old World which was largely to define the work of Henry James.

Why was the "international theme" so central to James's work in general, and to *Portrait* in particular? For one thing, James considered it a "complex fate" to be an American, by which he meant, to take his phrase literally, that that fate was woven of many strands – European descent (for good or ill, James's world is resolutely Eurocentric), a Puritan background set against a developing libertarian tradition, a kind of self-imposed cultural barrenness, a presumptive innocence or at least detachment from the ills and iniquities of Europe, a sense of oneself as open to new opportunities and modes of self-definition. The list could go on, but a tentative point needs to be made: as distinct from the "provincial" works listed above, James's novels place most of his protagonists in a setting in which putative national characteristics are pro-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

gressively tested and modified under the pressures of apparently alien circumstances. It is as if James wished, by way of experiment, to detach the individual strands of that "complex fate" and examine each cultural gene for its nature and influence. Europe was in effect the laboratory setting for his experiment – the matrix out of which these new creatures called Americans had evolved and to which, as to an abandoned and perhaps unrecognized parent, they needed to return for praise, punishment, advice, education, consolation, refreshment, reassurance, and ultimately a sense of their own identity. For to be an American is precisely to be defined by an "other," by something that has been left behind in the excitement of making oneself over. The return to origins represents the recapturing of a repressed past, the relearning of a language that one did not know one understood. For James, America was Europe in translation; his work amounts to a continual comparing of the two texts.

That work begins in some of the earliest tales and provides the themes for most of the major fiction of James's first period: *Roderick Hudson*, *Daisy Miller*, *The American*, *The Europeans*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*. What distinguishes *Portrait* is that the broad strokes of melodrama and conventional characterization – the hallmarks of James's apprenticeship – have been subtilized and subordinated for the sake of one thing: the portrait of an extraordinary young American woman "affronting her destiny." *Affronting*, not *confronting:* James's word appears to stress Isabel Archer's defiance, her boldness, her desire to put the world to the test. This, we might say, is the principal mark of Isabel's Emersonian spirit.[1] She seems to say, with the early Emerson, "You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstance. . . . I – this thought which is called I, – is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax. The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould. You call it the power of circumstance, but it is the power of me."[2] Who can resist this self-reliant representative of imperious American femininity? Those who surround her immediately enter her orbit. She winds a noble English lord around her finger; a strong-minded American businessman whose name is synonymous with the very latest method of spinning cotton is

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

spun in emotional circles by this willful girl; a wealthy expatriate American banker is persuaded to leave her a fortune. How can one fail to admire the power of such virgin excellence and self-possession? No one can, apparently – least of all the sympathetic reader, who cheers Isabel on in her pride and refusal to be dissuaded from her own stern claims and perfect circle. Even Gilbert Osmond, who might strike some as a mere fortune-hunter, knows and appreciates the true American article when he sees it. Would he ever propose to a *merely* flirtatious and rattle-brained American princess like Daisy Miller? It will be a test of his *own* mettle and self-possession to harness so much innocently arrogant energy and turn it to his use.

Isabel, of course, like the elder Emerson of "Fate," will discover that "we have two things, – the circumstance, and the life. Once we thought, positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half."[3] That is both sobering and consoling, for it is not simply that life is swallowed up in circumstance but rather that it is qualified by it, reduced by half but not annihilated. Osmond represents "negative power," the force of the alien "other" that seems to be "European"; but, as we know, he too is an American – though one who has consented to worship at the altar of convention, propriety, whatever seems to be "aristocratic" and nonvulgar. Such "Osmondism" is also part of the American scene, though Isabel had been protected from it, perhaps by her romantic and free-spirited father. So, we might say, she had to travel to Europe to discover a type of specious aristocrat she could easily have met in America. But James has other fish to fry, for Europe will provide not only the trap for her innocence but also the opportunity for her to repossess her dignity and sense of freedom by identifying with those who have been compromised before her. Eventually Isabel will learn to take "old Rome into her confidence" (New York Edition, Chap. 49), and the city will repay that trust by taking her into *its* confidence, returning a measure of what she has lost. Thus, Isabel will learn the further Emersonian lesson of compensation – that things go by halves indeed, and that nothing can be considered purely evil. It is a question of reciprocity – "Europe" taming her "American" half, "America" finding a way

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

to recoup its "European" loss by means that Europe itself provides. Why does Isabel need to leave Rome when it will contrive finally to meet her halfway?

Such a traditional humanistic reading of *Portrait,* whereby "America" and "Europe" stand as the metonymic poles of "innocence" and "experience" between which this essentially noble New World everywoman must negotiate her perilous way – a view reinforced by obvious Miltonic echoes in the book suggesting an archetypal "fall" from grace and expulsion from the "garden" at the hands of an egoistic "devil," leading to entry into an uncertain world of "choice" and the exercise of right reason[4] – such a familiar reading of *Portrait,* while clearly justified, is probably also inadequate. There is still something left over that baffles interpretation. So, for example, although the publication of *Portrait* in 1881 was greeted by a barrage of praise from leading critics – William Dean Howells in *The Century,* W. C. Brownell in *The Nation,* Horace Scudder in *The Atlantic Monthly,* John Hay in *The Tribune* – a persistent negative report also began to be heard. R. H. Hutton, writing in the *Spectator,* remarked of Isabel that "the reader never sees her, or realises what she is, from the beginning of the book to the close. She is the one lady of whom no portrait is given . . . the central figure remains shrouded in mist."[5] Margaret Oliphant, in *Blackwood's,* agreed, complaining that the book's title was unjustified, for "of the heroine, upon whom the greatest pains have been expended, and to whom endless space is afforded for the setting forth of her characteristics, we have no portrait."[6] So, too, *The Atheneum:* "There are, indeed, portraits of ladies enough and clear enough; the only one who is not portrayed so as to make the reader understand her is the heroine."[7] Even James's friend John Hay, turning this supposed defect into a virtue, noted that "the interest of the novel comes in great part from the vagueness of our acquaintance with Miss Archer."[8] And later critics amplified the point. Carl Van Doren, in 1921, spoke of the "never quite penetrable fiber of the heroine."[9] Quentin Anderson, in 1957, observed astutely that "the clarity, the light and sure touch, of the prose playing about the figure of Isabel only to reveal an obscurity, a

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

darkness within her lovely presence, has an effect which is among James's greatest achievements."[10]

Chiaroscuro – that is surely a principal Jamesian technique, refined from the work of Hawthorne. Isabel is presented initially as a creature of the sunshine whose perception is "clear" (Chap. 2) and who believes that one "should move in a realm of light" and of "happy impulse" (Chap. 6). But she is not, after all, the fair Rowena of Scottian romance; her eyes are grey, not blue, and her hair is "dark, even to blackness" (Chap. 5). Isabel figures her own nature as "garden-like" and therefore thinks of "introspection . . . [as] an exercise in the open air," but she is often reminded of other places, "dusky, pestiferous tracts, planted thick with ugliness and misery" (Chap. 6). She believes that "if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely," but the image itself frightens her. This fine American girl, so hopeful-seeming and expansive, determined to "regard the world as a place of brightness" (Chap. 6), nevertheless finds herself attracted to the equivocal "golden air" of Gilbert Osmond's "early autumn" (Chap. 29). Her imagination goes forward to meet this obscure figure; yet, even as he declares himself, it hangs back, sensing that "there was a last vague space it couldn't cross – a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous." At this point the author admits that his "young lady's spirit was strange," and informs us that she was to cross that tract despite its perilousness (Chap. 29). Isabel Archer – perversely, as it would seem – turns away from the light (as she will do on the last page of the novel) and walks steadily into the dusk.[11]

That last word represents James's figure for what appears to be Isabel's true destiny and desire throughout *Portrait*. Before she consents to marry Osmond, when the "world lay before her" and "she could do whatever she chose," Isabel chooses to walk alone through London in the "early dusk of a November afternoon" and positively enjoys the "dangers," losing "her way almost on purpose, in order to get more sensations" (Chap. 31). That quasi-Gothic indulgence in the pleasures of terror all too innocently prefigures a later scene, in which Isabel returns to London to be with the dying Ralph and feels helpless and anxious. Now she is

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

glad that Henrietta is there to accompany her, for "the dusky, smoky, far-arching vault of the station, the strange, livid light, the dense, dark, pushing crowd" fills her with "nervous fear"; and she remembers how she enjoyed walking away from Euston station alone "in the winter dusk . . . five years before. She could not have done that to-day, and the incident came before her as the deed of another person" (Chap. 53).

Yes, we note, Isabel has changed, for she has taken the full measure of Osmond's shadowy world where the lights have been put out "deliberately, almost malignantly," and the "dusk [which] at first was vague and thin" has deepened and become "impenetrably black" (Chap. 42). But is she entirely different? Will James really permit us to believe that Isabel's taste for the *crépuscule* had nothing to do with her decision to marry Osmond? In Chapter 42 the author allows his heroine to be "very sure" that the shadows of Osmond's stifling spirit "were not an emanation from her own mind," but the reader may be excused for wondering. There *is* something obscure in the soul of this American woman – though we are assured she was not "a daughter of the Puritans" – that draws her to the dark tracts of experience.[12] Why, otherwise, at the end of the novel, when Caspar Goodwood glares at Isabel "through the dusk" and bestows the "white lightning" of his kiss, does she turn away in terror and feel that when the "darkness returned she was free"? That "certain light" to which, it is suggested in Chapter 6, Isabel "could give herself completely" has now apparently dawned but indeed proves "too formidable to be attractive" (Chap. 6).

If the "straight path" that Isabel discerns after turning away from Caspar and toward the darkness is viewed in Dantean terms, it gives a strangely ironic twist to the opening of the *Inferno*. There the poet finds himself in obscurity ("una selva oscura"), where the "straight path" is unclear ("che la diritta via era smarrita"), and eventually spends a long time working his way up to the light of paradise. But Isabel's "straight path" will apparently lead her back to Gilbert Osmond's hell and the obscurity of her own dusky nature. Just fourteen years after the appearance of *Portrait*, Thomas Hardy would produce a final novel dedicated to exploring the treacherous

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

byways of modern sexuality and marriage, with a self-defeating "obscure" hero and a self-lacerating heroine who, like Isabel, marries a dessicated older man in the confusion of her own conflicted being. To deal with such painful cases, criticism would need to reach for a new vocabulary – and terms such as "neurotic"[13] – in place of James's more reticent notion of a protagonist whose character and fate could sufficiently be described as "complex."

2

The Portrait of a Lady first appeared in fourteen installments almost simultaneously in England (*Macmillan's Magazine*, October 1880 through November 1881) and America (*The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1880 through December 1881), exposing this first version of *Portrait* to a wide audience. Slightly revised, it was published in book form in both countries in November 1881. James's fees for the serial publication were considerable (more than $5,000), and his position in the magazine market was strengthened.[14] While *Portrait* could hardly be described as a best-seller, it was, according to George Monteiro, James's "largest commercial success" and became the object of much critical attention and comment.[15] Henceforth James would be known as the author of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

When the book reappeared in 1908 as part of the so-called New York Edition it had been subjected to James's own intense critical scrutiny and extensively revised. James thus established new terms for all future serious discussion of his one undisputed masterpiece: the two versions – of 1881 and of 1908 – would need to be compared as distinct though closely related literary-cultural artifacts. The work of comparing the two versions of *Portrait* has gone on for some time,[16] but the task has been rendered relatively simple for students since the appearance of the Norton Critical Edition of *Portrait* in 1975 with its textual appendix. What remains not simple at all is the question of how James's extensive rewriting of his earlier text affects the shape and meaning of the book.

One point of agreement among those who have studied James's revisions concerns precisely the erotic/neurotic element in the por-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

trayal of Isabel. Almost a half-century ago, in the first and probably still the best serious study of James's revisions, F. O. Matthiessen observed that the 1908 text, especially in its rewritten conclusion, sharpens James's analysis of the "mixed repulsion and attraction"[17] in Isabel's reaction to Caspar Goodwood. His masculine hardness and aggressive quality are everywhere strengthened. And when Caspar returns at the end of the novel to carry Isabel away, her anxious awareness that "she had never been loved before," which in the first edition "wrapped her about" and "lifted her off her feet" – and it is important to notice that in this first version Isabel romantically figures her own sense of missed erotic opportunity as itself a lover who will embrace her and transport her somewhere – is considerably complicated:

> . . . she had never been loved before. She had believed it; but this was different; this was the hot wind of the desert, at the approach of which the others dropped dead, like mere sweet airs of the garden. It wrapped her about; it lifted her off her feet, while the very taste of it, as of something potent, acrid, and strange, forced open her set teeth. (Chap. 55)

We observe that with the addition of the desert figure the antecedent of *it*, in "it wrapped her about," has changed dramatically. Now it stands for the "hot wind" of sexual desire, which annihilates the sentimental-romantic and forces Isabel to taste something "potent, acrid, and strange" that, shockingly, suggests male seminal fluid.[18] As Matthiessen remarks, this "image takes [Isabel] as far away from her surroundings and the gentlemanly devotion of a Warburton as it does from the decadent egotism of an Osmond."[19]

In the face of such rewriting, I find it hard to agree with Anthony J. Mazzella that the later Isabel fears "a loss through the erotic of . . . the freedom of the mind to function unimpeded." She exists, he goes on, "supremely on the level of pure mind, and the erotic would destroy that existence."[20] Such a formulation confuses what we may infer to be Isabel's rationalizations with James's own purposes. Those purposes include the portrait of a woman deeply troubled – ambivalently attracted/repelled, fascinated/disgusted – by the conditions of physical love, who retreats

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

to "mind" as a convenient nineteenth-century refuge from what James in 1908 seems to view as a distinctively twentieth-century (i.e., "modern") problem. It is surely significant that the Countess Gemini, in her revised revelation of the sordid background to the Osmond–Merle relationship, is made to react to Isabel's incomprehension by breaking out, "you've such a beastly pure mind. I never saw a woman with such a pure mind!" (Chap. 51). One can hardly believe that James intends the reader to sympathize entirely with a "pure mind" that remains so resistantly impervious to the truth. That oxymoronic "beastly pure" of the 1908 version pushes us toward the awareness that the "purity" of Isabel's mind, as a defense against and refuge from knowledge of the erotic, is itself suspect – a kind of "purity" within which lurks the very thing it fears.

Considering the evidence, it is equally difficult to accept Nina Baym's argument that the "rich mental life" James emphasizes in 1908 "effaces the original main quality of [Isabel's] character, emotional responsiveness," and that in 1908 "she is not a character likely to get swept away on a wave of feeling."[21] On the contrary, the Isabel of 1908 retains all of the responsiveness of 1881, with the addition of an even stronger reaction to erotic feeling. All of the "tears and anguish" (Chap. 54) characteristic of Isabel in the operatic deathbed scene with Ralph, for example, are retained. And her emotional response to Caspar Goodwood at the conclusion of the novel, as we have noticed, is if anything expanded. Not a sob or a tear is excised; Isabel's head in 1908 is described as "swimming"; and she replies to Caspar not by *saying* she wants him to leave but rather by *panting*. One can only agree with Matthiessen that James's revisions, in the main, the occasional "rococo flourish" notwithstanding, produce a "deepening of emotional tones."[22] Despite myriad changes in the texture of the novel – and it is by no means easy to see at each point what exactly James had in mind as he rewrote *Portrait* – the essential shape of the narrative, and of Isabel's character, remains intact. As I shall argue shortly, James's emphasis on "felt life" as the central criterion of value for author and protagonist alike remains sharply in focus.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-34753-2 - New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady
Edited by Joel Porte
Excerpt
More information

3

James's Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady,* written a quarter of a century after the initial composition of the book, provides a vital link between the early and late versions of *Portrait,* drawing our attention to the central issues that had compelled James's imagination from the start and that continued to give form to the novel in its final version. The argument that James's Preface betrays his earlier intentions by forging a rationale for the 1908 version of the novel (i.e., by focusing on Isabel's "consciousness" as opposed to the emotional intensity and high romantic illusions of 1881)[23] overlooks the simple fact that James was not only engaged in describing his revisions but also in reviewing what he had done in the first place. The Preface, that is, represents for James both an astute rereading of the earlier text *and* an attempt to bring his sense of his subject up to date. But in some crucial particulars the Preface offers "nutritive and suggestive truth[s]" applicable to both versions.

One such makes its appearance right at the start of the Preface and disarmingly draws our attention to a large question in the Jamesian canon – the question of Italy. James recalls that he worked away at the book "during a stay of several weeks made in Venice" in 1880:

> . . . the waterside life, the wondrous lagoon spread before me, the ceaseless human chatter of Venice came in at my windows, to which I seem to myself to have been constantly driven, in the fruitless fidget of composition, as if to see whether, out in the blue channel, the ship of some right suggestion, of some better phrase, of the next happy twist of my subject, the next true touch for my canvas, mightn't come into sight.

Alas, James goes on, he searched in vain for his "next true touch," admonishing himself "that romantic and historic sites, such as the land of Italy abounds in, offer the artist a questionable aid to concentration when they themselves are not to be the subject of it. They are too rich in their own life and too charged with their own meanings merely to help him out with a lame phrase; they draw him away from his small question to their own greater ones."

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org