

Imaginative architectures



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“ On her long journey from Rome her mind had been given up to vagueness; she was unable to question the future. She performed this journey with sightless eyes and took little pleasure in the countries she traversed, decked out though they were in the richest freshness of spring. Her thoughts followed their course through other countries)strange-looking, dimly-lighted, pathless lands, in which there was no change of seasons, but only as it seemed, a perpetual dreariness of winter. She had plenty to think about; but it was neither reflexion nor conscious purpose that filled her mind.

Disconnected visions passed through it, and sudden dull gleams of memory, of expectation. The past and the future came and went at their will, but she saw them only in fitful images, which rose and fell by a logic of their own.”(606)This passage, from the last chapters of *The Portrait of a Lady*, strikes me as one of the most brutally sad moments in the entire novel. Here Isabel, who has defied Osmond's wishes that she defer to the sanctity¹ of their marriage has, with a solemn and ghostly nod to the liberty and independence that has characterized her throughout, come to be beside her cousin Ralph as he dies. What makes the passage so effectively tragic is that in its tone, language and imagery, it picks up on notes that have been sounded again and again from the beginning of the novel; at the same time, however, we cannot fail to register the differences in the workings of our heroine's mind as she tries to make sense of what has become of her. Much of the poignancy of the above-quoted lines comes from the way in which they contrast with James's earlier descriptions of Isabel's mentality. It is surely part of her aptness as a protagonist that from the very beginning of the novel, her mind is constantly and sparkingly alive: “ Her imagination was by habit ridiculously active...”(86). The most fertile ground for her

imagination is her own life: “ She was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress.” (It is interesting to note, here and elsewhere in the novel, the way James often has Isabel treat herself in her own mind as an external, abstract, almost objectified subject: James might well have written *her own development*¹ or *her own perfection*¹, but chose not to, leaving us with the subtle impression that she is somehow disconnected from herself in her own mind.) Given these first descriptions of Isabel, it is hard not to register the simple power of the statement that, “ she was unable to question the future”¹she, and by natural extension the reader, has been deprived of one of her liveliest faculties, and James has ensured that we feel the immensity of this momentary loss. Another thing to note in this passage is James¹ metaphorical use of landscape. In the opening chapters of the novel, we are told of Isabel: “ Her nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one¹s spirit was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses.”(107) Now that her narrative is no longer an abstract question before her, her thoughts move through “ other countries¹strange-looking, dimly-lighted, pathless lands, in which there was no change of seasons, but only as it seemed, a perpetual dreariness of winter. “(606) Compared with the seemingly infinite openness of the initial descriptions, this new landscape is bleak indeed. The passage quoted at the top of this paper continues, picking up another metaphorical thread that is woven through the fabric of the novel: “...now that she knew something that so much concerned her and the eclipse of which had made life resemble an attempt to play whilst with

an imperfect pack of cards, the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with an architectural vastness.”(606) Like physical landscape, architecture figures prominently throughout *The Portrait* as an index of internal workings. The first detailed portrait¹ in the book is of Gardencourt, and from that moment on, we learn to take important cues from James¹ elaborate descriptions of structures of all kinds. Perhaps one of the most pointed examples is our first encounter with Osmond. As at the opening of the novel, we get a detailed view of the home before the inhabitant: “ The house had a front upon a little grassy, empty, rural piazza which occupied a part of the hill-top; and this front, pierced with a few windows in irregular relations... this antique, solid, weather-worn, yet imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes... The windows of the ground-floor, as you saw them from the piazza, were, in their noble proportions, extremely architectural; but their function seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in. They were massively cross-barred....”(279) With this brief image of Osmond¹s house comes a definitive, palpable change in mood; whether we are aware of it or not, the consequent introduction of our new character is colored at the very root by the somewhat sinister language of this description. Our information here diverges from that of our heroine, and so, long before Osmond¹s full nature is revealed to us, we cannot fully get behind¹ him as the man that should cause Isabel to “ drop to the ground.” (395) Now, late in the novel, when James has Isabel relate the great trick played on her to architecture, it resonates with all the times throughout the book when people, and especially our heroine, have been metaphorically

linked with houses and structures. To draw again on a quote I have already used in part: “ Her imagination was by habit ridiculously active; when the door was not open it jumped out of the window. She was not accustomed indeed to keep it behind bolts...”(86) A little further on, in Ralph’s musings about his cousin, James writes: “ He surveyed the edifice from the outside and admired it greatly; he looked in at the windows and received an impression of proportions equally fair. But he felt he saw it only by glimpses and that he had not yet stood under the roof. The door was fastened, and though he had keys in his pocket he had a conviction that none of them would fit.”(116) In returning to the architecture metaphor as Isabel runs to the {sanctuary¹ of Gardencourt}” She had gone forth in her strength; she would come back in her weakness...”(607) James only too vividly draws the contrast between Isabel’s initial freedom and her eventual imprisonment within the secretly and malevolently-built structure of her marriage. It is with one word that James sums up the central tragedy of Isabel’s story when, fitted with this new, terrible consciousness, she concludes: “ The only thing to regret was that Madame Merle had been so well, so unimaginable.”(607) Once again, James strikes a note that has sounded again and again over the course of our reading. Indeed, imagination is in many ways the novel’s primary subject, as it is our heroine’s ruin; by the end of this almost unspeakably cruel and sad story, we can only hope that it will be her redemption and transcendence as well.