

## The Passage to Acquisition in The Ambassadors

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## The Passage to Acquisition in *The Ambassadors*

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### Introduction

Lambert Strether's loss in *The Ambassadors* (1903) has attracted critics' attention for a long time.<sup>1</sup> Strether gradually loses the ethos of America while getting trapped in Europe, and looks at the ugly side of Europe in the end. He also loses the fortune that he might have obtained upon completion of his mission. Focusing on these points, it seems reasonable to regard Strether's loss as the theme of this novel; however, Strether seems to not only lose his faith and fortune but also find a replacement in the end, as do other characters in the novels of James' major phase.<sup>2</sup> As Claire Oberon Garcia points out, *The Ambassadors* is focused upon consumerism (154).<sup>3</sup> While shopping, Strether appears to break with his old beliefs and acquire new desires in a way that is similar to how people usually obtain commodities through money. The purpose of this paper is to propose the possibility of interpreting *The Ambassadors* as a story of acquisition by considering Strether's consumption activity.

People in his hometown, Woollett, value success in business and the abandonment of pleasure. When we look at the following quotation from Henry James' "Project of Novel," it turns out that Strether underestimates his life in line with Woollettian thinking: "However, he is, in the rather provincial, the somewhat contracted world in which he lives, a highly esteemed figure and influence. ... He has known no extremes of fortune; has never been very poor, yet still less had any but the most limited enjoyment of money..." (*Amb* 378-79). This plan is put into

practice in the novel, and Maria Gostrey intimates to the reader that Strether should be a dominant figure in Woollett since he is the type of person that Mrs. Newsome wishes to marry (*Amb* 51). As seen from the above, Strether is not as poor and unattractive as he thinks; his sense of failure is based on comparison to other successful persons in Woollett.

In this paper, I will outline Strether's exchanges of value in three steps. *The Ambassadors* depicts a great deal of consumption and economic episodes, but I will focus upon the three most important scenes, which mirror Strether's transformation: the purchase of the Victor Hugo collection, lunch at a first-class restaurant and the fictional purchase of a picture by Émile Lambinet. In these respective stages, Strether first exchanges his asceticism for the Hugo collection, then exchanges his usual moderation in pursuing pleasure for an expensive lunch, before finally he exchanging his materialism for a picture of Lambinet.

## I

Let us consider each step of this exchange of value in detail. When he decides to stop Chad's return in spite of his mission, Strether buys the complete collection of Victor Hugo. That is the first and biggest expenditure in his life. Strether had bought "lemon-coloured volumes" (*Amb* 63) in his youth in Paris, but they were left unbound, so they faded and became covered with dust. These books symbolize his passion for art, but they have lost their charm under the weight of his ordinary days of work and fatigue. In contrast to this memory, this time in France he can acquire this set of books with beautiful and expensive covers. Bookbinding is most common in French culture and has the power to heighten the value of art. According to Willa Z. Silverman's study, the bourgeoisie organized societies of bibliophiles, and bookbinding at the end of the nineteenth century was incredibly expensive (38, 158). It would therefore help the bourgeoisie display their wealth. Unlike this development, the market for books was unusually extended in the United States after the second half of the nineteenth century. After the first public library in

Boston was established in 1852, the number of libraries and the stock of books increased year by year and books became freely available to the inhabitants of every region. The improvement of printing technology and transportation networks enabled people to own books at lower prices wherever they lived. Intellectuals lost the privilege of possessing books, and literature was thus open to the public. Books were deprived of their extra value as a consequence of this new trend in publishing low-cost books for the mass market. Unlike lower-cost books, however, ornately-decorated books reinforced the value of their contents.

James seems to hope for literature to be enjoyed only by the privileged. In *The American Scene* (1907), the author praises the Boston Athenaeum in comparison with the public library: he thinks that the Boston Athenaeum is one of the most important places in the city, itself the cultural and intellectual center of New England (232). The author admires the Athenaeum for a unique, attractive value which people can find in no other libraries, while he deplores the popular appeal of the public library in Boston (AS 232-33). Yoshitaka Kawasaki, who contributed to the first unified account to the historical study of public libraries in the U.S., provides us with useful information. The Boston Athenaeum was the predecessor of the Boston Public Library. It was for members only and was based on stocks invested by the upper class. It was a small library, but contained well-selected volumes and works of art; it appears to be the type of library whose patrons would be proud of their exclusive membership (Kawasaki 176-81). Given these circumstances surrounding books, the author would hope that books are a pleasure available only to the intelligent circle whose members understand the value of art more fully; and Strether, who is a double of the author (Beach 270), shares the same thinking.

Seen in these contexts, bookbinding is a mark of admiration for artistic quality; and it reminds Strether of the importance of art. We should note that Strether thereby exchanges his spirit of frugality for his passion for art. Woollett is modeled after New England; and Max Weber, a contemporary of James, shows that the

Puritans thought that money is the property of God, not of human beings; therefore, it was forbidden for followers to waste God's money on a selfish aim: i.e., art, appearances, pleasure or luxury (161-71). Here, Strether abandons this ethics of thrift and in return obtains an old and renewed desire: a passion for art. Strether's Paris is vividly colored by a youthful memory of books and art, yet he has forgotten it during his dismal days in Woollett. When lavishly buying bound books, he has rediscovered his desire after a long period of life.

## II

As we have seen in the previous section, what the past represents for him turns from thriftiness to a passion for art through his purchase of the Hugo collection. The next transformation occurs at lunch with Madame de Vionnet at an old, expensive restaurant. Though not made explicit, it is clear that Strether comes to Notre-Dame to seek the origin of the scene of *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) by Victor Hugo when he confesses his recent purchase of the books to Madame de Vionnet there. It is not an exaggeration to say that the purchase of those books leads him to the Cathedral.

Strether's circumstances demonstrate how it takes nerve to have lunch with her. Mrs. Newsome is the key to Woollettian success. If he completes the mission to take Chad back, he will win considerable success, which has hitherto never been available to him: a post of an adviser in a new big business, vast wealth, and an easy life in his old age. For Mrs. Newsome, to help Madame de Vionnet means a double betrayal: one is to spoil the success of the Newsomes, and the other is to be romantically involved with another woman.

Strether evaluates women by comparing them with Mrs. Newsome. Firstly, he thinks Maria Gostrey is attractive because, unlike Mrs. Newsome, she has a charm unbound by strict morality. She wears many jewels and a dress of daring design whose neck is widely cut to show the beautiful female shoulder line, which contrasts with the "Queen Elizabeth"-like (*Amb* 43), high-collared, black, moderate

dresses seen in his hometown. Pierre A. Walker notes that Miss Gostrey has the same attributes as the scandalous Mary Stuart, who was quite the opposite of the Virgin Queen and was regarded as a “bad” woman (62). Strether connects an image of Mrs. Newsome with sexual abstinence through the analogy of her to Queen Elizabeth. It is sexual attractiveness that he has in his mind as a measure of comparison. In addition to her appearance, Miss Gostrey’s actions are also daring when she sits at a small table with Strether by themselves in a dimly lit restaurant before the opera. This is not allowed by the custom of Woollett, and an old man from Woollett regards it as bold (*Amb* 42-43). The narrator implies that Strether considers Maria Gostrey more attractive than Mrs. Newsome, and thus, a comparison works in his mind. Next, Strether rates Madame de Vionnet the highest of all women whom he has known. She exercises greater fascination for him than Miss Gostrey because Madame de Vionnet does not need to sell anything to buy anything else whereas Miss Gostrey skillfully collects things of higher value by selling those of lower value (*Amb* 146). Strether finds beauty in the former’s act because there are no capitalist exchanges. Strether has a complicated personality, being a man who seems to desire a fortune while, at the same time, hating the mercenary spirit of his hometown: the capitalist exchange is at once desired and dishonorable. Madame de Vionnet’s possessions are inherited from an interminably long past; they show the power of old money<sup>4</sup> and gain Strether’s confidence. Compared with Madame de Vionnet, Mrs. Newsome would be aligned with Maria Gostrey.

He exchanges his asceticism for lunch with Madame de Vionnet and changes his way of thinking about his past. Strether himself looks back and notes how stoical episodes color his past: he has never gone on an adventure, such as visiting museums with some young lady in his youth (*Amb* 43). Even after marriage, he has missed out on various pleasures in order to work for a living (*Amb* 43). His life has been devoid of such pleasure because of the asceticism planted in him by the Woolletian ideology. He now gains the ability to enjoy such pleasures by exchanging

his stoical belief for an adventure. He also promises to help Madame de Vionnet and sheds his former respect for Mrs. Newsome, who is the epitome of asceticism.

For Strether, lunch with her at the restaurant means more than merely having an expensive lunch. Walker points out that the restaurant is Tour d'Argent (63), which has a long history of more than 400 years. Royalty and celebrities have dined there. Strether, who admires such a well-established, inherited fortune and status, could enjoy a kind of aristocratic pleasure, and indulge in the pleasure of wasting money all the more for the expensive cost of lunch. Besides, Madame de Vionnet is the most attractive female character in the novel for him, and her value is heightened by placing her in a traditional place. Pecuniary and sexual pleasure makes the old man, who has never had fun or much money, aware that his old beliefs from Woollett are neither absolute nor universal.

### III

He has thrown away his former ethos of economy, asceticism, and faith in Mrs. Newsome while "wasting" money on art and enjoying sexual and pecuniary pleasures. What remains in him is the desire for success. The narrator suggests that Strether might have changed his heart in relation to Mrs. Newsome (*Amb* 211); nevertheless, he does not give up his errand. Although his love or respect for Mrs. Newsome has left him, the appeal of her money and power would continue to haunt him. The final stage of his exchange enables him to throw away this last obsession.

Strether quarrels with Sarah Pocock on behalf of Madame de Vionnet after having lunch with her. While worsening the situation, he somehow believes that he has time to recover his relationship with the Newsomes. Instead, he goes to a rural area in order to seek the scenery captured in Lambinet's paintings. It is strange for him to feel such affection for a picture by a minor painter after he has been polished in France. We may say that this strange choice is closely connected to the significant role of the landscape. Lambinet is a painter who was overwhelmingly popular in Strether's youth; but gradually this popularity died out. Strether imagines

that if he faced the works again, he would have been disillusioned by them; nevertheless, the central recollection of his youth is linked to one of Lambinet's landscapes. The following passage shows how inseparably a picture and his memory are related:

It had been offered, he remembered, at a price he had been instructed to believe the lowest ever named for a Lambinet, a price he had never felt so poor as on having to recognise, all the same, as beyond a dream of possibility. He had dreamed had turned and twisted possibilities for an hour: it had been the only adventure of his life in connexion with the purchase of a work of art. The adventure, it will be perceived, was modest; but the memory, beyond all reason and by some accident of association, was sweet. (*Amb* 303)

As this quotation demonstrates, young Strether has found a picture by Lambinet at a gallery on Tremont Street in Boston. There are three moments reflected in Lambinet's painting: firstly, the moment when Strether has fully realized his poverty; secondly, the moment when he has entertained "the illusion of freedom" (*Amb* 132) in pursuing art; thirdly, the moment when he remembers this conflict as part of his precious past. His memoir about Lambinet's painting shows that, however poor he is, he can live happily when pursuing his desire for art.

This painting is actually outspread before Strether in the country in France. The narrator portrays Strether's stroll as if he actually stepped into the picture which he had once so greatly desired to possess:

The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and river a river of which he didn't know, and didn'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 was grey; it was all there, in short it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. (*Amb* 304)

We must pay attention to the last phrase: “it was all there, in short it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet.” This description shows that three spaces are mingled in this scenery: Boston in the past, France in the present, and an ideal place which connects the other two places. Strether could remove a sense of oppression in this junction because his old obsession is closely connected with the past and the present and when being resolved, it demands his ideal with which he could rewrite his past and present. All these times and spaces are contained in the quoted scenery.

Next, we will consider the metaphor used in the description of Strether’s stroll to see how his oppression gets resolved: “Moreover he was freely walking about in it. He did this last, for an hour, to his heart’s content, making for the shady woody horizon and boring so deep into his impression and his idleness that he might fairly have got through them again and reached the maroon-coloured wall” (*Amb* 304). After enjoying an impression of the picture as long as he had fancied the possibility of buying the picture, he has arrived at a brown wall, which implicitly means Tremont Street; and we can interpret this moment as meaning that he visits the former gallery in his imagined landscape and fictionally purchases the picture which he has not been able to buy. Since he came to the country, he has felt a freedom outside the control of the Newsomes’ money; and the moment of purchase signifies Strether’s break from his former desire for success. The phrase “idleness” significantly suggests that Strether has thrown away his former Puritanism or materialism<sup>5</sup> because he had once hated to be seen as idle, yet the word here is used positively. This purchase of the Lambinet leads Strether to fully understand his own desire.

Abandoning his former desire for success and his ethos of diligence gives him freedom and a self-satisfying view of life. E. M. Forster insists that *The Ambassadors* forms an hourglass (140); he uses the metaphor to express how the positions of Strether and Chad are reversed. It is sure that the story has the shape of an hourglass, in that many dichotomies are reversed at the end of the novel, but Strether never replaces Chad. He is in fact standing upon an upper step on a spiral staircase. In the beginning of the novel, his personality is described by using the metaphor of money: "...but he was 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" (*Amb* 18). This is a description soon after Strether has arrived in Europe. He has no companion and decides not to meet Waymarsh anytime soon to enjoy a solitary walk in Europe. He is a man of imagination, and Europe provides him with so many impressions; he can freely accept and experience those impressions better on his own. Here he equates the value of a solitary walk, a blank schedule and his impression with additional money. In other words, freedom and leisure hours are the highest value for Strether. He finally achieves what he wants complete solitude through his fictional purchase of the Lambinet,<sup>6</sup> an act that has the highest value in his view.

## Conclusion

It has been said that Strether loses everything and that this is a story steeped in pathos: even the author states that it is too late for Strether to live. However, he actually attains a new power to live through his many exchanges of value whilst in Europe. As a man who acts in the market, he has never lost what he needs. We cannot see Strether's acquisitions due to his biased perception; but, when we consider his consumption activity and value judgment as well as his obsession which causes his sense of failure, we should understand that he in fact discovers new desires, aptly summed up in his famous speech to Little Bilham, imploring him to

“Live!” (*Amb* 132).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, F. O. Matthiessen looks on the dark side of Strether’s renunciation. R. P. Blackmur also put a qualification on the ending: a sacrifice always accompanies “a heightened awareness” (276). Sallie Sears summarizes it as follows: “The blow to him is total: the past is undone, the future without promise, the present both a reminder and a measure of both” (124). Manfred Mackenzie states that Strether cannot gain even a vicarious life. Thus, they stress Strether’s forfeiture or loss. According to Siobhan Peiffer’s study, the positive side of Strether’s situation at the end of the story is weakened by the immensity of his sacrifice.

<sup>2</sup> In later works, the author more clearly provides some hope in compensation than he does in the earlier works. Two of the major phase novels, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, feature both loss and acquisition. In *The Wings of the Dove*, affection between Kate Croy and Merton Densher disappears; yet, Milly’s virtue lightens the unhappy ending and Densher becomes aware of its sublimity. Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl* gains a realistic point of view and strength to be independent through a loss of innocence and a deep connection to her father. It is therefore possible to think there is compensation in *The Ambassadors* because this work also belongs to the major phase.

<sup>3</sup> Two other critics mainly look at the link between *The Ambassadors* and consumerism or commercialism. Marianne DeKoven sees feminine mobility in consumer culture. Siobhan Peiffer insists that we can understand Strether’s justice in terms of the metaphors of commerce in *The Ambassadors*, commercialism in James’ other works, and their historical contexts.

<sup>4</sup> Maxwell Geismar explains that James’s ideal would be found in inherited fortune.

<sup>5</sup> Max Weber explains that idleness or non-labor is the heaviest sin in the Puritan community because jobs are given by God and labor equals serving Him and increasing God’s money (157-58). If people do not work and enjoy their leisure without compunction, they are against God. Woollett eventually modernizes, and consumerism broadly spreads; but still its Puritanism remains. We can understand this strict faith by considering that Mrs. Newsome is compensating for her ancestors’ sins through unprofitable work, with which Strether is forced

to help.

<sup>6</sup> It is sure that Strether's acquisition is sustained not only by himself but also "Europe." Jessica Berman points out that Strether would not reach his complicated relative view only by his Americanness (70). The ideal world in Lambinet's picture is destroyed by his awareness of a sexual relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet; and this destruction helps Strether gain a solitary position.

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