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James's "Lady" in Postmodernity

by James P. McDaniel

John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* (1977) presents one of the early humanistic critiques of postmodern literature – "a literature without qualities," as Warner Berthoff (1979) ironically calls American literary art after 1945. For both Gardner and Berthoff, though the latter seems more inclined to appreciate the implications of postmodern literature, contemporary fiction is marked by a lack of "moral concern" in the humanistic sense of the term. Or, to put it in a different way, Gardner and Berthoff each comment on the ways in which the postmodern novel (as well as other literary genres) have come to undermine conventional literary, cultural, and ideological codes. Gardner distinguishes what he calls "moral fiction" from postmodern fiction by saying that "moral fiction" is not immersed solely in the subversive aesthetic of "play" (5-6) – an aestheticism, in Gardner's opinion, that undermines the dimensions of fiction and of life he finds most compelling and necessary for the continuance of a humanistic conception of culture.

This opposition between the aestheticism of "play" (or simply "pure aestheticism") and "moral fiction" is to be found at the heart of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. More precisely, it is in its heroine, Isabel Archer, that this opposition finds a metaphorical icon. For Isabel, through most of the novel, is a young aesthete who is attracted by "surfaces" and "impressions" – by incomplete or entirely subjective appearances; in short, she is attracted to the "spirit of play" that Gardner denigrates. The tragedy of the novel – which results in Isabel's unfortunate and misguided marriage to Osmond – is Isabel's belated recognition of the moral emptiness of her aestheticism and the short-sightedness it breeds. Also at the heart of this opposition is the place occupied by the feminine principle within the social structure of the novel as well as within culture at large: Isabel embodies not only the turmoil faced by the aesthete, but also the social, moral, and psychological problem of achieving independent self-definition.

Sandra Djwa describes the opposition between aestheticism and moral concerns as an opposition between James's own conception of art and that of Walter Pater found in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). According to Djwa, Isabel functions as a critique of Paterian aestheticism through her own acceptance of it and, finally, through the

tragic result of this acceptance. James's conception of Pater's aestheticism, according to Djwa, was that "aestheticism alone – despite the pleasures of initial impressions – leads not to the ends Pater had promised but rather to pain" (73). This shallow Paterian vision of experience and aestheticism, from James's point of view, is embedded in Isabel's own conception of her "self": the omniscient narrator tells us that "Her life would always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce; she would be what she appeared, and should appear what she was" (54). That her life (or life in general) would obey "the most pleasing impression she should produce" is seen, in the broader context of the novel, as an ironic disclosure indeed, for other individuals – we need to think primarily of Osmond here – are often more responsible for dictating the circumstances and incidents to which Isabel must respond. Isabel's subjectivity might provide an abstract, theoretical conception or "impression" of the world, but it will not provide a workable one on the social or interactive level. Isabel's view – at the early stages of the novel – is that she creates her world through her impressions. The problem is that she must also face the impressions *others* have of her in order to interact socially with them. Madame Merle finds this same flaw in Isabel's conception of her "self" when she states that "There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman[;] . . . we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. . . . One's self – for other people – is one's impression of one's self" (172-173).

The fact that Isabel needs to consider the impressions of others in order to overcome a purely individuated and aesthetic conception of art – or life – finds even clearer expression in her visits to the Gallery at Gardencourt. It is in these visits that Isabel ostensibly becomes the subject *viewed* by others rather than the subjectivity which *views* others. It is at this point the necessity of a kind of "mutuality of definition" becomes clear. Ralph sees Isabel among the portraits at Gardencourt as a portrait "better worth looking at than most works of art . . . undeniably spare, and ponderably light" (49). Since "Isabel-as-work-of-art" is the central metaphor of the novel – or at least of its title – this becomes especially significant. Ralph's vision of Isabel as a portrait is genial and flattering; what we need to consider, however, is that Ralph's vision of her is not the one which ultimately "frames" her into her circumstances as a purely aesthetic possession: it is Osmond's extreme and demoralized aestheticism which performs this subversive act. It is the way in which Osmond's "inner" sensibilities impress Isabel as being "of quality, inner intensity" (220) that both attracts her, and, as Djwa puts it, "sends conventional standards of decorum and judge-

ment flying out the window" (76). The irony of Isabel's impression of Osmond is that both author and reader perceive him quite differently. As Cheryl Torsney succinctly puts it, Osmond "exemplifies the imperialist/material[ist] spirit James so abhors" (91) – not to mention the Paterian aestheticism which ultimately causes Isabel's tragic marriage to him.

The tragedy of the novel, which is necessarily the tragedy of Isabel's character, comes about through Isabel's belated recognition of the inadequacy of her subjectivism and aestheticism and in the suffering this recognition brings about. The "discovery" Isabel makes is that her narrow view of the world and of others is insufficient and has caused her misfortune: the realization that she has not ever really "known" Osmond for what he is stands as a prime example of this. Isabel's suffering is a necessary step in her moral development. The end of the novel – the scene in which she meets Goodwood – seems to offer her a "way out" of her suffering in that she could choose to leave Osmond and start a new life. But for Isabel, running from what she has been would only be a return to it; she responds to Goodwood's pleas by saying, "As you love me, as you pity me, leave me alone!" (590). Her world is no longer one which she "creates" through her impressions, but is one in which she must react to such unfathomables as "moral necessity" and "responsibility."

Mr. Touchett's belief that "the ladies will save us" is again one of the phrases that sticks in our minds as we seek to approach the character of Isabel Archer, the novel in general, and the function of the feminine principle within the framework of our own postmodern culture. The cultural and ideological relativism bred by Paterian aestheticism and Cartesian subjectivism are overcome by Isabel's moral decisions. The critique of culture and consciousness raised by the postmodern novel and by postmodern philosophy is answered – perhaps incompletely – by Isabel's turn away from subject-centered identity. In the end, even if the postmodern critique of ideology and culture viz a viz language is "right," if cultural and moral codes have outlived their usefulness or veracity, why not begin with the assumption that the "construct" of morality is necessary for understanding both self and other? The destructive – indeed, tragic – result of Isabel's "self-created-reality" is clearly felt in the novel and functions as a comment on the postmodern critique of identity as well. If, as Touchett remarks, "the ladies will save us," it will not be "the ladies" as a gender; it will be the ways in which "woman-as-other" will instruct and motivate our response to the collapse of moral and ideological structures within

culture (whether real or imagined, the result is the same). In the postmodern "twilight of the idylls," to use Nietzsche's phrase, even if moral and ideological codes are viewed as mere constructs, it is necessary to cultivate those belief-systems which will enable culture to function as a multi-gendered, multi-faceted domain that has not reached a universal apocalypse, but has, through deconstructing the economies of subversion and hierarchy, come to a new beginning – a beginning Isabel anticipates at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

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