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# A Revolution of the Screw: Peripheralising Europe

‘Where *is* your “home” moreover now – what has become of it?’

Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, 438

Can the documents of the west, Walter Benjamin’s famous ‘documents of civilization’, help us to understand and articulate the peripheralisation, the provincialisation, of the west?<sup>1</sup> If we are at a moment, as Hamid Dabashi has recently put it, at which “Europe” [...] has exhausted its epistemic possibilities and has now positively imploded into itself”, can a European literary and cultural tradition shed any light on this implosion, or look to a refigured global scene that emerges from it?<sup>2</sup>

I will address this question here by attending to a faint echo that can be heard, passing between two of Henry James’s later novels, *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), an echo that reaches to our own time, and to the contemporary moment at which we are required to assess, again, the relation between barbarism and civilisation.

## James, Keats, and wild surmise

This echo in James is itself an echo of an earlier text – John Keats’s ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ (1816) – a poem devoted to a poetic excavation of the echo, of the process by which one textual moment is picked up and amplified in another. Here is Keats’s poem in full:

Much have I travell’d in the realm of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western isles have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then I felt like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
 He star'd at the Pacific – and all his men  
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.<sup>3</sup>

Keats's encounter with Homer, and with the 'western isles' that are in his demesne, is famously conducted here through the medium of George Chapman's seventeenth-century translation.<sup>4</sup> As the sonnet continues, building towards its climax, this process of recovery through translation is given an explicitly colonial dimension. It is imagined first as an act of epistemological colonisation – the mapping of the solar system by earthly astronomers (perhaps here inspired by William Herschel's discovery, in 1781, of the planet Uranus). This scientific dominion over the previously unknown, summoning Uranus from its ancient obscurity into the light of knowledge, is then married with the geopolitical colonisation of the terrestrial globe – the expansion of the demesne of the west towards the Pacific by the first explorers of the New World. Keats mixes up his conquistadors here – confusing Hernán Cortés with Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who is regarded as the first European to have seen the Pacific – but his interest both in Cortés and in Balboa is probably drawn from his reading of William Robertson's 1777 *History of America*, which he discusses at some length in an 1818 letter to George and Georgiana Keats.<sup>5</sup> If, as Emily Rohrbach has recently argued, Keats's interest in the 'European discovery of the Pacific' as 'a shift in knowledge of world historical significance' is informed by Robertson's account, then Robertson himself represents this discovery unequivocally as a matter of geopolitical conquest and colonisation.<sup>6</sup> Robertson vividly describes the moment that Balboa first views the vast ocean, until then unseen by European eyes, and he and his fellow explorers are struck dumb in 'wild surmise':

As soon as [Balboa] beheld the South Sea stretching in endless prospect below him, he fell on his knees, and lifting up his hands to Heaven, returned thanks to God, who had conducted him to a discovery so beneficial to his country, and so honourable to himself. His followers, observing his transports of joy, rushed forward to join in his wonder, exultation and gratitude. They held on their course to the shore with great alacrity, when Balboa advancing up to the middle in the waves with his buckler and sword, took possession of that ocean in the name of the king his master, and vowed to defend it, with these arms, against all his enemies.<sup>7</sup>

Keats's sonnet evokes this moment of revelation, in order to reflect on the politics of knowledge production, as this takes the form of literary translation, of scientific discovery, and of geopolitical colonisation. In each case, the old thing (Homer's verse, the planet Uranus, the 'endless prospect' of the southern seas) is refashioned, and becomes new, in the act of translation, discovery, and appropriation. Robertson's historiography, Herschel's astronomy, Chapman's translation, Cortés/Balboa's exploration, conspire with Keats's verse itself to make the world anew, and to make Homer speak to us, in Chapman's loud and bold voice.

### America and Europe: stretching and veering

These associations are there in Keats's sonnet – and they are activated freshly, and given another turn of the screw, when the sonnet appears in the two moments I have in mind in James's later fiction. The first comes in the primal scene in *The Ambassadors*. Lambert Strether's time in Europe is coming to an end – his 'days' in France, he thinks are 'numbered' – and so before returning to America he decides to give himself a holiday, in the form of an excursion into rural France, in search of the 'cool special green' that he associates with a particular and much loved work by the French painter Émile Lambinet.<sup>8</sup> He initially travelled to Europe from America in his capacity as an ambassador for his employer and possible future wife, Mrs Newsome. His task was to find Mrs Newsome's son, Chad, and to prise him away from his infatuation with Europe in general, and with a woman named Madame de Vionnet in particular, with whom, it is feared, he is having an illicit affair. Strether quickly tracks down both Chad and Madame de Vionnet, but during the time of his acquaintance with them, and with the Parisian milieu to which they belong, he finds that his sympathies gradually transfer from the mother to the son, from America to Europe. He is convinced (partly as a result of his infatuation both with Madame de Vionnet and with Chad) that the relation between them is pure, above board, innocent. The 'attachment', he believes, is 'virtuous' (*TA* 154). 'The attachment's an innocent one' (212). His belief in that virtue, and that innocence, is such that, to protect it, he breaks off his ties with Mrs Newsome, and the entire American set of which she is the doyenne – the ties upon which his future happiness and prosperity had rested. He takes his short trip to the French countryside towards the end of the novel, after he has renounced his role as ambassador, and in order to reflect on this strange act of self-sabotage, before leaving Europe to resume a now solitary and relatively impoverished American life. But it is as he is taking his rest in the country, immersed in the cool light of his

remembered Lambinet painting, that he makes a discovery which leads him to reassess everything that he has seen during his time in Europe – a discovery that is associated with Keats’s sonnet. As he walks by a country river, he sees a couple in a rowboat, ‘two very happy persons’, ‘a young man in shirtsleeves, a young woman easy and fair’ (418). The scene makes him happy. The spectacle is, he thinks, ‘idyllic’; but it sours when he realises that the couple, so intimate, so evidently together, are none other than Chad Newsome and Madame de Vionnet. As Isabel Archer, in *Portrait of a Lady*, suddenly understands the truth of the relation between Madame Merle and her husband Gilbert Osmond when she sees them alone together, in a shared attitude that is indescribably but unmistakably that of lovers, the couple in the boat, Strether understands, have an attachment that is not, after all, either virtuous or innocent.<sup>9</sup> He can see the signs of their erotic relation in the bodily attitude they share with one another, which speaks loud and bold; he can also see, more prosaically, that they do not have with them the clothes they had left Paris in, and so they must have stayed the night, at some lovers’ retreat:

Her shawl and Chad’s overcoat and her other garments, and his, those they had each worn the day before, were at the place, best known to themselves – a quiet retreat enough, no doubt – at which they had been spending the twenty-four hours, to which they had fully meant to return that evening, from which they had so remarkably swum into Strether’s ken. (TA 424)

The force of this revelation, for Strether, is equal to that shift in the structures of knowing and seeing that we find in Keats’s sonnet, when a new planet swims into our ken, or when we see the Pacific coast, and find that our orientation of east and west, of near and far, has suddenly been fundamentally rearranged. It is at this moment that Strether’s blindness, his insistence on hiding the erotics of attachment beneath a veil of virtue and innocence, gives way to the kind of knowing that lies at the heart of the novel, what Strether thinks of, in a moment of intense loneliness and alienation, as ‘the deep, deep truth of the intimacy’ that is revealed to him, magically, in the sight of the happy lovers, rowing towards him across the river (425).

This is a glancing reference to Keats’s sonnet, but its significance deepens, as Adrian Poole, Bart Eeckhout, and Gert Buelens have noted, when this moment in *The Ambassadors* finds an echo in a related moment in *The Golden Bowl*.<sup>10</sup> Keats’s sonnet stirs in *The Ambassadors* at the critical moment of Strether’s discovery, and it is at a similarly

significant turning point in *The Golden Bowl* that the sonnet appears again, this time much more forcibly. *The Golden Bowl*, like *The Ambassadors*, is concerned, above all, with the relation between America and Europe, and with the means by which an emerging American culture draws on and reconstitutes a European aesthetic, political, and intellectual history. Strether is the figure, in *The Ambassadors*, for this hinge or fulcrum between two cultural powers – dominance passing from the Old World to the New, as westward the course of empire makes its way. As Adrian Poole has pointed out, Strether's name suggests his predicament, his being stretched between one structure of knowing and the other – a stretching which, as Clare Pettitt has suggested, runs against the opposite experience of tethering which is also carried in Strether's name.<sup>11</sup> In *The Golden Bowl*, the figure for this transfer of cultural power is the unimaginably wealthy art collector Adam Verver, whose name suggests not stretching or tethering but veering (with perhaps a distant echo of Melville's Captain Vere, another veerer).<sup>12</sup> The adultery plot around which the novel turns – Adam Verver and his daughter Maggie are each married to rarefied specimens (the beautiful American Charlotte Stant and the Italian nobleman Prince Amerigo respectively), who, we are led to understand, are having an affair with each other – is orchestrated by Verver through his activities as a collector of European art. Verver purchases Prince Amerigo for his daughter, as a kind of gift, as he purchases Charlotte as a gift for himself. He regards them both as what he calls 'human acquisitions', and consistently describes Amerigo as a fine artwork, a rarity of exquisite old European provenance.<sup>13</sup> 'You're round, my boy', Verver says to Amerigo, as he is preparing to betroth him to Maggie. 'You're inveterately round in the detail. It's the sort of thing in you one feels – or at least I do – with one's hand' (*GB* 126). Verver weighs Amerigo in his hand like a connoisseur, assessing his aesthetic quality, at one point, as if he were the artefact of the title, the crystal golden bowl. 'You're a pure and perfect crystal', he says to Amerigo, who replies, with a peculiar knowing irony, that 'if I'm a crystal I'm delighted I am a perfect one, for I believe they sometimes have cracks and flaws – in which case they're to be had cheap!' (127).

Verver establishes the four-way relations between himself, Maggie, Charlotte, and Amerigo, as part of his business as a procurer of European artefacts. And it is in his recollection of the revelatory moment that his vocation came to him – the moment that he saw the possibilities for 'floating', as an earlier James protagonist puts it, European art on the American market – that he evokes Keats, and the Keatsian passion of discovery.<sup>14</sup> The sudden awareness of 'the affinity of Genius, or at least of Taste with something in himself', Verver thinks, 'affected him as

changing by a mere revolution of the screw his whole intellectual plane' (*GB* 128-9). The magnitude of this revolution is comparable, in Verver's own estimation, with that lightning realisation of new knowledge dramatised by Keats:

He had, like many other persons, in the course of his reading, been struck with Keats's sonnet about stout Cortez in the presence of the Pacific; but it was probable that few persons had so devoutly fitted the poet's grand image to a fact of experience. It consorted so with Mr. Verver's consciousness of the way in which at a given moment he had stared at *his* Pacific that a couple of perusals of the immortal lines had sufficed to stamp them in his memory. His 'peak in Darien' was the sudden hour that had transformed his life, the hour of his perceiving with a mute inward gasp akin to the low moan of apprehensive passion that a world was left to him to conquer and that he might conquer it if he tried. (128)

This is a peculiarly flexible passage, in which the revolutions of the intellectual plane turn both ways. Cortés's (or Balboa's) passage westwards to the Pacific leads to the European colonisation of the Americas, leading in turn to the amassing of American wealth, which allows Verver to establish his own empire, the founding of his museum in his fictional home town of 'American City'. This westward movement, though, allows Verver to see that his own Pacific lies not to his west, but to his east. The world that is left to him to conquer is the world from which those explorers, Balboa and Cortés, originally set sail – the world of Keats's golden realm, and Homer's. The revolution of the intellectual plane, the discovery that a future can be summoned from an encounter with the past, that a new planet might be born from the discovery of an old one, that the 'endless prospect' of the Pacific might be found once more in the Mediterranean, feels to Verver like the 'turning of the page of the book of life' which made 'such a stir of the air as sent up into his face the very breath of the golden isles' (*GB* 128). The air of Keats, of Chapman, of Homer is released from the imaginary turned page, the turn of the intellectual plane, and feeds Verver's new passion, so, he says, to 'rifle the Golden Isles had become on the spot the business of his future' (128).

This turning, like the turns of James's earlier exploration of double-jointed being in *The Turn of the Screw*, supplies the principle of relation, of attachment, in *The Golden Bowl*, and in *The Ambassadors*. It determines Strether's relations with Madame de Vionnet and Chad on the one hand, and with Mrs Newsome on the other. It is there in

every bodily attitude, every angle of incidence, in *The Golden Bowl*. It is palpable at the close of the narrative, as Adam Verver prepares to leave London and his beloved daughter in order to return to American City with Charlotte, thus breaking up her affair with Amerigo. In the closing moments of the novel, Adam Verver and Maggie step out of the ‘great eastward drawing-room’ (GB 585) of Maggie’s house onto the balcony overlooking the street – leaving Amerigo and Charlotte to share a silent farewell in the great, golden room that has already begun to grow dark. Together father and daughter look west, over the street, and past that towards the Atlantic, and towards the America to which Verver is about to return. But then they ‘turned from the view of the street; they leaned together against the balcony rail, with the room largely in sight from where they stood, but with the Prince and Mrs Verver out of range’ (592). Amerigo and Charlotte, art objects both, commodities bought up by the Verver wealth, sit together in the eastward gloom, in whatever intimacy they have shared throughout, which the narrative has not been able to penetrate and which runs against the current of American capital, the rapid current which carries European art to American City. The interval between the two couples at this close is warped by the turbulence of opposing histories and epistemologies and economies, opposing ways of knowing that are moving under the skin of the polished air, so one can feel the turning, the shifting of the scene, as father and daughter look into the darkening room in which lover and lover sit like undiscovered planets, out of range, beyond our ken.

## Turning European

James’s precise, delicate attention to the modulations of erotic and filial attachment is laid upon this shifting ground, on the turn of the intellectual plane that Verver finds embalmed in Keats’s sonnet. His psychological complexity is powered by it; but while James’s later prose tends to be absorbed in these domestic plots, in the rarefied and intensely anatomised relations between father and daughter, between husband and wife, between lover and lover, it is my suggestion here that the turning that is performed in these novels serves a powerful political function, one that is keenly attuned to the demand facing us today, that we fashion a critical response to our own shifting epistemological and geopolitical planes. Jonathan Arac suggests in a 2012 essay that a ‘postcolonial James’ might emerge from a close attention to Verver’s reading of Keats. ‘As Adam Verver bears the spoils of culture to American City’, Arac writes, ‘*The Golden Bowl* modernizes the Roman Westward course of Empire, a trope deeply set in Western culture at

large and in American culture particularly'.<sup>15</sup> James's novel, for Arac, offers a critique of 'the westering of culture that follows the westering of Empire', an extension of the process which 'brings Homer to England, via Chapman' – and to trace this critique would be to find in James a version of Edward Said's analysis of the politics of aesthetic form.<sup>16</sup> Said, Arac argues, is centrally concerned with the fact that our aesthetic artefacts are products of 'European political domination', and so European art is 'compromised by the imbalance of power from which it arose'.<sup>17</sup> The 'consonance'<sup>18</sup> that Arac finds between Said and James derives from his perception that both writers attend to the political power structures that give rise to cultural products, while at the same time investing in the capacity of those products – the art works that proliferate in James's novels, as well as the novels themselves – to exceed their own conditions of possibility. A Saidian James, for Arac, is one who exposes the colonial conditions that give rise to European and American culture, while performing a critique of those conditions, one which is not itself determined by them.

This may be so; but if James is to cast any light on the politics of European culture today – or on the 'peripheral Europes' to which this special issue is dedicated – then we need to see past the horizon of Said's orientalism. The westward course of Empire that shaped twentieth-century thinking about colonialism, postcolonialism and decolonisation has stalled, in the twenty-first century, with the decline of American hegemony, and the shifting of the geopolitical tectonic plates apparent in the growth of Chinese political and economic power, and latterly in the invasion of Ukraine by Putin's Russia. Dabashi's assertion that Europe has 'exhausted its epistemological possibilities' is related to these shifts – and to the waning of the 'westering' logic that saw the growth of a global western hegemony as inevitable. The historical momentum, after World War II, towards European integration – towards 'ever closer union' – has faltered in the current century, as the political will towards globalisation was weakened by 9/11 and its aftermath, and the economic base of the neoliberal project was weakened by the crash of 2008. The return, across Europe and the west, of populist nationalisms that reject the politics of globalisation (seen perhaps most clearly in Donald Trump's 'America First' rhetoric) is a symptom of this failure, as is the UK vote, in 2016, to leave the European Union – a secession whose consequences are still playing out today.

It is in this context that we are required to rethink the relation between Europe and its peripheries, and to undertake what Dipesh Chakrabarty has influentially called the 'provincializing' of Europe. As Cemil Aydin has suggested, in his 2007 book *The Politics of*



*Anti-Westernism in Asia*, to understand the meaning of ‘Europe’ today requires us to break the ties that attached Europe to the idea of ‘the west’, and the west to the concept of modernity more generally. The difficulty, for Aydin, is how to ‘refashion Eurocentric modernity’, how to undo the binding in the project of European modernity between colonial violence and philosophical enlightenment, when so many of our conceptual resources for carrying out that work are a legacy of European modernity itself.<sup>19</sup> ‘Added to the myth of the homogeneity of Western civilization’, he writes, ‘was the permanent association of the West with both modernity and the international order itself’ – an ‘assumption’ of the constitutive relations between Europe, the west, and modernity, that is ‘a legacy of the nineteenth-century ideology of western supremacy’.<sup>20</sup> Chakrabarty’s commitment to the provincialising of Europe – the rediscovery that Europe is made of up of local parts and histories that are not affiliated to or consistent with the idea of an overarching Europe (itself a stand-in for western modernity) – is part of this attempt to resee the continent, in the context of larger shifts in the homogeneity and coherence of the west. The process of provincialising Europe, Chakrabarty writes in 2008, enables us to free ourselves from the ‘founding “myth” of Europe, the Europe that the history of colonialism ‘assumed’ into existence, and that was then projected as the ‘original home of the modern’.<sup>21</sup> ‘To “provincialize” Europe’, he writes, ‘was precisely to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity’.<sup>22</sup> Chakrabarty wants to recover ‘parochial’ and particular Europes from the myth of a homogeneous and universalising ‘west’; similarly, Hamid Dabashi sets out to reassess the relation between a mythical Europe and its various others – what he calls Europe’s ‘shadows’. ‘To me, today’, Dabashi writes in 2019, ‘Europe, and a fortiori the West, is not a reality sui generis. It is a delusional fantasy, a false consciousness, at the full service of an imperial hegemony. The object is not to run away from it. The object is to dismantle and overcome it.’<sup>23</sup>

To approach the peripheral in Europe today is to take part in this discussion, this reassessing of the relation between the overarching concept of Europe and of the west, and the specific local instantiations which occur within and outside the realms of that concept. One cannot begin to understand the phenomenon of Brexit – a significant event in the peripheralising of Europe – without reference to this discussion. The legitimacy of the European Union, Dabashi argues, was ‘always contested’ by those who were represented as peripheral partners – ‘from Greece to Spain and Portugal’ – because it was a ‘forced’, manufactured entity

designed ‘economically to counterbalance the United States’.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, Brexit serves a useful function in dismantling the concept of European integration, even if it is driven by hateful and reactionary forces. ‘With their xenophobic Brexit’, Dabashi writes, ‘the British delivered the very idea of [the EU] a coup de grâce’.<sup>25</sup> One has only to consider the manifest reluctance with which Jeremy Corbyn (leader of the British Labour Party from 2015 to 2020) campaigned for Remain in 2016 – a reluctance that was in keeping with his lifelong Euroscepticism – to see how a strand of the British left resented the European Union as an apparatus of imperialism. But at the same time, how can one welcome a British secession from a political union that, however bound up it is in the globalisation of capital, also enshrines the possibility of a form of community that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state, and that is the closest we have to a guardian of international human rights? How can one welcome it when it is undertaken explicitly to obstruct the ‘free movement of people’ across national borders? How can one welcome it when it is so clearly part of a reactionary lurch to the far right in Europe that endorses every imaginable bigotry and hatred? Dabashi asks himself the rhetorical question, ‘What would the world do without Europe?’, in order to answer that it ‘will reinvent itself’<sup>26</sup> (at the risk, of course, that the authors of such reinvention might be the likes of Vladimir Putin, or Xi Jinping, or Donald Trump). It is a mark of the difficulty that Brexit poses to thinkers of the left, though, that many do not share Dabashi’s sense that the future of Europe lies outside the borders of the European Union. Ali Smith, for example, in her recent *Seasonal Quartet*, suggests that it is the European Union itself that is the vehicle for such reinvention. Smith’s four novels, *Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring*, *Summer*, are a collective act of mourning for the union to which Brexit has delivered a coup de grâce.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on a literary and cultural tradition that runs from Ovid to Shakespeare to Dickens to Woolf and Joyce, Smith’s quartet seeks to salvage a European tradition – and the products of European cultural history – in order to look to a future that sees the possibility of a European collective preserved, while divested of its will to power.

### Misrecognition and the revolution of the screw

The question, then, that both Smith and Dabashi pose, in different ways, is how and whether we should draw on a cultural archive that has been formed by the history of ‘Europe’, in order to look past the current crisis in European and western democracy. Is it possible to employ the resources of a philosophical tradition, a lyric tradition, a literary

tradition, to develop a kind of thinking that can anatomise the crisis that those traditions in part brought about? This is a pressing question for us now; it is the question, too, that provokes Henry James, when he looks through Keats to Chapman, and through Chapman to Homer's western isles. It is the genius of Keats's sonnet, and of Keats's sonnet as James reanimates it, that it allows us to see the terms in which the periphery inhabits the centre, and the centre the periphery. When Cortés's men look at each other with a wild surmise, their wonder arises from their sudden awareness that what for one person is periphery is for another heartland. To come to the Pacific coast, to travel to the edge of the known, is to discover that the world-making, paradigm-building forces that arrange the globe in terms of east and west, near and far, are contingent, and subject to sudden and profound reordering, as these paradigms give way in the face of revelation. The sight of the Pacific coast reshapes the planet, as the sailing of an obscure planet into our ken reshapes the solar system. James's allusions to Keats, in *The Ambassadors* and in *The Golden Bowl*, draw on the energy of this revelation, this discovery of a new relation between centre and periphery, just as the historical passage from Europe to the US as the dominant global power is under way. The faint Keatsian echo that we can discern between James's two novels is part of the effect – the sense that the kind of knowing that James is reaching for is achieved not by orienting oneself, by placing oneself securely in one's own ground, but through the realisation that the very possibility of orientation (and occidentation) involves a continual estrangement from that ground, a discovery of oneself not here but elsewhere. Strether's moment of realisation is achieved more fully when it comes into collision with Verver's – as both moments draw their power from their summoning of other displacements: James displaced into Keats; west displaced into east; old displaced into new; Homer displaced into Chapman; Greek displaced into English.

James's thinking about the relation between America and Europe at the turn of the twentieth century is conducted through this capacity to unsettle the ground of knowledge, to reproduce the turning – the veering, the stretching, the displacement – that knowing is (a capacity that is Maisie's special gift in *What Maisie Knew*). His work, for that reason, stands as a testament to the limits of a historical conception both of America and Europe, as the boundaries of the west shift under the pressure of a specific moment in the globalisation of capital. But, at the same time, the turning that James's work performs does not remain bound to its own historical moment, but comes into collision, too, with the moment of reading, with the paradigms of knowing within which a work of literature enters the world afresh, with each new 'turning of the page

of the book of life'.<sup>28</sup> To read James now is to read him at a time when, for Dabashi, the 'faultiness' of Europe, as 'the quintessential condition of coloniality' has been exposed: 'all its sciences', he writes, 'have now ended in the nuclear calamity that hovers over all of us on this earth, all its moral philosophy ended in and at the Holocaust, all its glorious literary masterpieces ended in Donald Trump's tweets'.<sup>29</sup> It is to read him at a time when the realignment of Europe and its peripheries has required us to question the legitimacy of the cultural products of Europe and the west – and to ask how western centres of knowledge production, constituted, as Priyamvada Gopal has recently put it, 'in the crucible of empire', can be the vehicle of that inquiry.<sup>30</sup> James's novels seen in this light – his elaborate, filigreed syntactical constructions – are exemplary of the 'literary masterpieces' that lead, inexorably, to the 280-character utterances with which Trump has befouled the discursive environment. It is in this context, in this scene of reading, that James's aesthetics of turning – his capacity to examine and to enact the cultural, political, and aesthetic conditions of knowing – bears a political weight. In placing his actors on the turning ground of a form of knowing that is always outside itself, always situated at the dissolving threshold where new thinking might swim, unbidden, into our ken, James makes of his novels a kind of apparatus for testing the possibility of knowing itself. The artefacts of a cultural heritage that James collects and preserves in his work – as Verver preserves his spoils in *American City* – are always mobile, always unsettled, always prepared to come into new conjunctions with a kind of knowledge that has not yet been preserved, or assimilated.

One of the key forms that this kind of knowing takes in *The Ambassadors*, and that I offer here by way of a conclusion, is the experience of misrecognition. James's novel is held together by a series of failures of understanding, which occur at each weight-bearing passage in the narrative, and which gather around Strether's repeated failure to recognise a Europeanised Chad, to marshal the conceptual capacity to decode him, despite having known him since he was a child. The first of these moments comes when Strether is walking in Paris, shortly after his arrival in Europe, and he finds himself standing outside Chad's apartment in the Boulevard Maiesherbes, looking up at the balcony. As he looks, thinking of Chad, so a lithe figure appears on the balcony, as if in response to his thoughts. 'A young man', the narrator says, 'had come out and looked about him, had lighted a cigarette and tossed the match over, and then, resting on the rail, had given himself up to watching the life below while he smoked' (*TA* 89). This scene on the balcony gains some of its arresting power from its precognition of the scene in *The*

*Golden Bowl*, in which Adam and Maggie lean on their balcony rail, looking into the room in which their spouses are hidden from view. But it also sets up a dynamic of mutual observation that repeats throughout the novel, gaining weight and colour as it does so. Looking down, while Strether looks up, the man sees that Strether is watching him: 'Strether soon felt himself noticed. The young man began to look at him as in acknowledgement of his being himself in observation' (89). In this stretched moment, the identity of both men enters into a peculiar kind of suspension. Is the young man on the balcony Chad? In looking down at Strether is Chad recognising his mother's American ambassador, here to take him away, to take him home? Strether thinks that he might be. He 'wondered at first', the narrator says, if the man on the balcony 'were perhaps Chad altered, and then saw that this was asking too much of alteration [...] Strether had conceived of Chad as patched, but not beyond recognition' (89).

This moment of uncertainty, this face-to-face meeting which causes both participants to waver, to set aside their habitual forms of address, ends as Strether comes to the simple conclusion that he is in fact in the presence not of Chad but of 'Chad's friend', Bilham. When the elements of this scene of misrecognition recur, though, a little later in the narrative, its effects are more marked. Strether is at the theatre with his friends Maria Gostrey and Waymarsh – in a box at the Français – discussing Chad. Strether asks Maria whether Chad, the Chad who has come under the influence of 'Europe', is 'monstrous', and as she is answering him, the 'door of the box had opened', and 'a gentleman, a stranger to them, had come in with a quick step' (TA 116). As in the earlier balcony scene, this encounter introduces an interval of unknowing, in which the identity of the stranger is peculiarly suspended, put into abeyance. This scene ends, in a reversal of the last, with Strether's realisation that 'they were in the presence of Chad himself' (117), who has, after all, been patched beyond all recognition. But even after Chad's fabulously altered identity has asserted itself, Strether remains caught in the grip of a wild surmise, a kind of hallucinatory disbelief that the European influence (and that of Madame de Vionnet) could have so transformed Chad, could have made of recognition itself such an uncanny experience. 'The fact was', Strether thinks, 'that his perception of the young man's identity – so absolutely checked for a minute – had been quite one of the sensations that count in life; he certainly had never known one that had acted, as he might have said, with more of a crowded rush' (117). Strether here experiences that giddy revolution of the intellectual plane that Verver feels as he reads Keats, and that Cortés's men feel as they look on the Pacific. 'He was in the presence',

he thinks, 'of a fact that occupied his whole mind', and in the thrall of an 'emotion' of 'bewilderment':

The phenomenon that had suddenly sat down there with him [Chad himself] was a phenomenon of change so complete that his imagination, which had worked so beforehand, felt itself, in the connexion, without margin or allowance. It had faced every contingency but that Chad should not *be* Chad, and this was what it now had to face with a mere strained smile and an uncomfortable flush. (117-18)

At this moment in the box, as the theatrical performance is unfolding beneath them, Strether and Chad enter into an encounter with one another that takes place in the turning realm of change itself, in which neither one of them are themselves, and in which the process of recognition reveals itself in its naked guise. The space in which this encounter takes place is the formal heart of the novel, its 'deep, deep truth' (*TA* 425), the ground around which it turns, and which shows itself at each of these nodal moments of misrecognition – so it is not surprising, is perhaps even inevitable, that the elements of this scene, and of the balcony scene before it, should return in the novel's climactic episode, the Keatsian moment of misrecognition that I have already discussed, the moment when Chad and Madame de Vionnet row towards Strether, hidden beneath the strange veil of their anonymity. As the couple swim into Strether's ken, he has the same sensation he had early in the novel as he stood before Chad's balcony – the feeling that the person he observes is observing him. As the boat approaches Strether, the narrator says, the 'air quite thickened' with 'intimations', vague forebodings, whose sinister qualities are amplified by the fact that the strangers on the boat seem to know him. They 'had by this time none the less come much nearer – near enough for Strether to dream the lady in the stern had for some reason taken account of his being there to watch them' (419). The uncanny quality of this encounter feeds on its mirroring of the scene before it in Maria Gostrey's box, and the scene before that in the Boulevard Malesherbes; and then, as the boat comes fully into Strether's field of view, we arrive at the moment of intellectual revolution, the moment for which the novel is written:

She [Madame de Vionnet] had taken in something as a result of which their course had wavered, and it continued to waver while they just stood off. This little effect was sudden and rapid, so rapid that Strether's sense of it was separate only for an instant from a

sharp start of his own. He too had within the minute taken in something, taken in that he knew the lady whose parasol, shifting as if to hide her face, made so fine a pink point in the shining scene. It was too prodigious, a chance in a million, but, if he knew the lady, the gentleman, who still presented his back and kept off, the gentleman, the coatless hero of the idyll, who had responded to her start, was, to match the marvel, none other than Chad. (418–19)

This is a peculiar scene, one of the more peculiar scenes in James's oeuvre. It is difficult to inhabit the drama of Strether's seeing here. It is difficult to enter into the time that elapses, the 'instant' or the 'minute' during which Strether has 'taken in' the 'something' that is Madame de Vionnet's identity, and Chad's. It is difficult too to enter into the same recognition on the part of Madame de Vionnet (or the Madame de Vionnet who is at this point anonymous, a non-person), who has also 'taken in something' which causes the boat to veer, to waver, in an apparent attempt to prevent this collision, this swimming of the obscurity of being into knowledge and focus. It is difficult to time it, or quite to imagine what it would be to look on a known and loved face and see only a blankness, an unmadeness. There can be few readers who have not found this scene, and the two previous scenes that it reprises, oddly disjointed, as we are asked to imagine an encounter, between Strether and Madame de Vionnet, or Chad, or Bilham, in which familiarity is mixed with strangeness, amalgamated with it, in a fashion which quite distinctly eludes a narrative tense. Madame de Vionnet does not hide her face behind her blushing pink parasol, but 'shifts' as if to do so. Chad does not hide his face from Strether's close observation in Maria Gostrey's box. Rather, what James's prose presents us with is an extended period during which a face is at once strange and familiar, in which all the ingredients of familiarity are there in plain sight but combined with an estrangement, an alienation, that the narrative of dawning realisation cannot shift, as if here not knowing a person and knowing them are brought together in a peculiarly welded instant. This difficulty, though, this refractory and untimely quality, even as it disrupts the flow of the fiction, is not an aberrance but the culmination of the novel's close analysis of the erotics of intersubjectivity. This instant or minute of abeyance is the unknowing that is the condition and the possibility of fiction itself, of art, an instant that is powered, as the aesthetic instant is, by its resistance to thought. It is, Strether thinks at the very moment that he recognises the couple, 'as queer as fiction, as farce, that their country could happen to be exactly his' (TA 419). The

country that Strether had come to for relief and rest from his failed ambassadorship – the ‘cool special green’ of a painting by Lambinet, from whom Lambert Strether takes another element of his many-sided name – is the space of art, of artifice, and as Strether stands before the twin objects of his infatuation, what opens between the three is the turning ground of the imagination itself – the imagination without margin or allowance.

‘Foreign to its familiarities’ Hamid Dabashi writes in *Europe and its Shadows*, ‘a stranger at home, I stand in front of Europe and ask Europe please to introduce itself’.<sup>31</sup> The strangeness of Europe to itself, and to those who stand before it, is a legacy of its colonial history, and a necessary effect of its peripheralisation, the failure of the always spurious forms that made of Europe something homogeneous, and hegemonic. The products of its culture, the literary masterpieces that Dabashi sees as mere precursors to Trump’s tweets, serve now not as vessels of knowledge, not as containers of a European heritage or tradition, but as witnesses to the intervals in knowing that are the conditions for the imagining of political community. Madame de Vionnet remarks, at the close of *The Ambassadors*, on the loss of nationality that has befallen Strether, as a result of his encounter with herself, with Chad, and with Europe. ‘Where’, she asks, ‘is your “home” moreover now – what has become of it?’ (TA 438). What has become, in *The Ambassadors*, of the sense that your country might be the same as mine, that we might belong, as we look at each other over the wavering gulf that separates us, to a shared community? If James’s novel is an extended answer to this question, it is one that suggests both that such community, such mutual recognition, is always in part a fiction, and that it is the purpose of art – its vocation – to occupy the realm that opens when mutual recognition fails, and we feel the weightless turning of a whole intellectual plane.

## Notes

- 1 See Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, where he makes the famous claim that ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’, in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 253–64, p. 248.
- 2 Hamid Dabashi, *Europe and its Shadows: Coloniality After Empire* (London: Pluto, 2019), 9.
- 3 John Keats, ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’, in *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Heinemann, 1966), 25.
- 4 See Allardyce Nicoll (ed.), *Chapman’s Homer*, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).



- 5 See Keats's letter of 19 February 1819, where he writes that 'I have been reading lately two very different books Robertson's *America* and Voltaire's *Siecle De Louis xiv*'. *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 248.
- 6 Emily Rohrbach, 'Reading the Heart, Reading the World: Keats's Historiographical Aesthetic', *European Romantic Review*, 25:3 (2014), 275–88, p. 276.
- 7 William Robertson, *The History of America*, 3 vols (London: A. Strahan & T. Cadell, 1788), vol. 1, 289–90.
- 8 Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (London: Penguin, 2008), 410, referred to in-text citations as *TA*.
- 9 See Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Penguin, 2011), 429. Isabel sees Madame Merle and Osmond together: 'Madame Merle was standing on the rug, a little way from the fire; Osmond was in a deep chair, leaning back and looking at her'. The tableau, Isabel, thinks, 'made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light'. Max Saunders, in a fine close reading of the moment that Strether sees Chad and Madame de Vionnet in the boat, notes this connection between *Portrait* and *The Ambassadors*. See Max Saunders, "'Across Something": Impressionist Effects', *CUSP: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Cultures*, 1:2 (2023), 170–91.
- 10 See Adrian Poole, 'James and the Shadow of the Roman Empire', in Gert Buelens (ed.), *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75–92, pp. 82–3; Gert Buelens and Bart Eeckhout, 'Always a Potent and an Impotent Romantic: Stylistic Enactments of Desire in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* and Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar"', *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 34:1 (2010), 37–63, pp. 45–6.
- 11 See Poole, 'James and the Shadow of Empire', 83; Clare Pettitt, 'Henry James Tethered and Stretched: The Materiality of Metaphor', *Henry James Review*, 37:2 (2016), 139–53.
- 12 For a reading of veering in Henry James, see Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 105–13.
- 13 Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (London: Penguin, 2009), 169, referred to as *GB* in in-text citations.
- 14 See Henry James, *The American*, where Newman describes the moment that his own 'mania' for collecting dawned on him: 'It was only twenty minutes before that he had brought the first picture of his life, and now he was already thinking of art patronage as a pursuit that might float even so heavy a weight as himself'. Henry James, *The American* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27.
- 15 Jonathan Arac, 'Henry James and Edward Said: Problems of Value in a Secular World', *Henry James Review*, 33:3 (2012), 233–38, p. 235.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 238.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 233.

- 19 Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 193.
- 20 Aydin, *Politics of Anti-Westernism*, 199.
- 21 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), xiv.
- 22 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, xiii.
- 23 Dabashi, *Europe and its Shadows*, 8.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 See Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Penguin, 2016); Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Penguin, 2017); Ali Smith, *Spring* (London: Penguin, 2019); Ali Smith, *Summer* (London: Penguin, 2020).
- 28 James, *The Golden Bowl*, 128.
- 29 Dabashi, *Europe and its Shadows*, 43.
- 30 Priyamvada Gopal, 'On Decolonisation and the University', *Textual Practice*, 35:6 (2021), 873–99, p. 878.
- 31 Dabashi, *Europe and its Shadows*, 9.