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Cosmopolitanism and Affect in Henry James' *The Ambassadors*

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This essay explores the interplay between cosmopolitanism and affect in Henry James' The Ambassadors*. It reads the novel's protagonist, Strether, as an embodiment of the cosmopolitan* flâneur *and examines how he complicates and challenges this identity as conceptualised by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. Due to his evasive cosmopolitan identity, Strether fails to maintain affective bonds with other characters. As such,* The Ambassadors *challenges James' own sense of cosmopolitanism by staging various iterations of affect, most notably grief, guilt and loss, as undermining the cosmopolitanism the novel at first seems to promote. I conclude that Strether's acute emotional responses can be read as a critique of the cosmopolitan* flâneur *who possesses a level of detachment that is not desirable. The novel levels a critique against cosmopolitanism's seeming universalism. This tends to promote an abstract ideal that disregards the cosmopolite's individual emotions and sensations – in* The Ambassadors*, cosmopolitanism is a fundamentally unethical way of living.*

In Henry James' *The Ambassadors* (1903), the American protagonist Lewis Lambert Strether is sent to Paris to bring back his fiancée's son, Chad, to take over the family business. Strether's mission, however, is not as straightforward as it might seem at first. In his 1908 preface to the novel, James describes the disturbing effect Paris has on Sterther's identity: it is "a place in which Strether's errand was likely to lie and his crisis to await him" (James, *The Ambassadors* 42)[1]. As Strether wanders through the streets of Paris and enters into various kinds of relationships with several of Chad's friends, including the sophisticated Madame de Vionnet, Strether embarks on a journey of self-discovery, seemingly transforming from a provincial American into an urban cosmopolitan. Yet, while Victorian society often celebrated cosmopolitanism as a "revitalizing force" (Evangelista 182), allowing individuals to foster affective communities across national, political, and linguistic boundaries, Strether fails to fully maintain his emotional relationships with both his American and European friends. The "crisis" that awaits him in Paris, then, is the result of various failed emotional transactions between himself and other characters, and of his failure to fully analyse or express himself in

[1] For subsequent references to *The Ambassadors*, only page numbers will be indicated within the text.

a comprehensive way. As he tells Chad, "'I don't explain myself even *to* myself. How can they, then,' Strether asked, 'understand me?'" (432, emphasis in original).

In this essay I will focus on Strether as an embodiment of the cosmopolitan *flâneur* and examine how he complicates and challenges this identity as conceptualised by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. I will argue that, for Strether, his cosmopolitan identity is in fact an evasive – and at times even self-deceptive – form of cosmopolitanism rather than a genuine and successfully accomplished identity, which is why he fails to maintain affective bonds with other characters. My argument will be informed by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses on cosmopolitanism and affect studies to examine the interplay between cosmopolitan *flânerie* and the fraught emotional transactions between Strether and other characters. Sara Ahmed's concept of the "sociality of emotions", which tracks "how emotions circulate between bodies", (4) provides a fruitful framework for my discussion on affect.[2] In Ahmed's conceptualisation, emotions are not inherent or static within a subject but are in constant flux, and it is through affective contact with others that identities are shaped (10), an idea which is key to Strether's (unsuccessful) development of a cosmopolitan identity.

In his debut piece for the American magazine *Cosmopolitan*, James wrote an obituary of the American publisher Wolcott Balestier, presenting the cosmopolitanism he shared with Balestier as a liberal ideal that allowed him to overcome national boundaries and immerse himself in foreign cultures: "He had the real cosmopolitan spirit, the easy imagination of strangeness surmounted" ("Wolcott Balestier" 47). For James, the "cosmopolitan spirit" was inextricably linked with freedom, imagination and creativity, enabling individuals to become 'citizens of the world',[3] a central idea that is put forward throughout his literary work. Scholarship has often considered James to be an embodiment of cosmopolitanism (Berman 138) because, throughout his life, he travelled extensively through Europe and North America, incorporating his experiences and impressions – the tensions between the local and the global, between citizenship and cosmopolitanism – in his novels, short stories and travel sketches alike. While, in his earlier texts, James presents cosmopolitanism in more negative

[2] Like Ahmed, I will use the term "affect" to include affect, emotions, feelings and desires.
[3] The word 'cosmopolitan' is derived from the ancient Greek for "citizen of the world" (OED).

terms – Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), for example, describes herself and other expatriates as "mere parasites, crawling over the surface" (217) – his later work, most notably *The Ambassadors*, exhibits a more ambiguous and fraught understanding of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, *The Ambassadors* challenges James' own sense of cosmopolitanism as articulated in Balestier's obituary by staging affect, most notably, grief, guilt, and loss, as undermining the cosmopolitanism the novel at first seems to promote.

'Cosmopolitanism' was, in the nineteenth century, as it is now, a contested and ambiguous term; it was a "fundamentally heterogeneous phenomenon" that cannot be reduced to a single definition (Agathocleous and Rudy 390). In its essential form, the term 'cosmopolitan' refers to a person whose primary affiliation is with a worldwide community rather than with one delineated by national or ethnic boundaries (Nussbaum). Cosmopolitan identity thus challenges the traditional "idea of belonging", which is why many nineteenth-century thinkers denounced the concept of cosmopolitanism as "politically and morally suspect" (Evangelista 15, 3). The term was often used as a "pejorative for 'uprooted' diaspora groups", especially Jewish people, and to describe what were considered to be uncontrollable, multicultural spaces (Huber and Jansen 41). Yet, the term 'cosmopolitanism' was also employed in more positive ways. The Kantian sense of the term – his understanding of cosmopolitanism as a political and ethical project that aimed to safeguard the "rights and security of all" (Evangelista 2) – was often applied to celebrate international mobility and free trade (Agathocleous and Rudy 389). As I will show, *The Ambassadors* harnesses this ambiguous potential: the novel understands cosmopolitanism as fostering freedom and imagination while, at the same time, associating it with loss and failure.

Central to a cosmopolitan experience of the metropolitan city is urban *flânerie* as exercised by the cosmopolitan *flâneur*, a literary figure theorised and popularised in the writings of Charles Baudelaire and, later, Walter Benjamin. In "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), Baudelaire describes the *flâneur* in the following way:

> For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at

> home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world […] we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness. (9-10)

As a cosmopolitan *flâneur*, Strether embodies this paradoxical experience described by Baudelaire: Strether is a spectator, or investigator, of the metropolitan city while at the same time experiencing a sense of alienation from it. Yet, whereas the Baudelairean *flâneur* remains detached from the events he observes (Shaya 51), for Strether, emotional detachment is impossible. In other words, unlike what Virginia Woolf roughly twenty-five years later would describe as "street haunting" – the idea that the *flâneur's* eye "floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks" (71) – Strether does not remain a passive observer but is very much psychologically and affectively immersed in his surroundings. When Strether visits the Luxembourg Gardens, for example, "he passed an hour in which the cup of his impressions seemed truly to overflow" (112). Unlike Georg Simmel's notion of the "modern mind" as a "calculating one", reducing "qualitative values to quantitative terms" (53), Strether is not a rational observer but overwhelmed with emotions.

Failed Emotional Transactions in the Metropolitan City

From the very beginning, Europe, and in particular Paris, is depicted as a space of freedom and self-development. While Strether's Puritan hometown in Massachusetts is associated with moral earnestness and rigid piety, Paris seems to allow for sophistication, worldliness, and freedom. On the ship to Europe, Strether experiences "such a consciousness of personal freedom as he hadn't known for years; such a deep taste of change and of having above all […] nobody and nothing to consider" (55). Paris represents a space where Strether can renegotiate his own identity and social relationships, free from the social constraints he experienced in Woollett. Paris is a place that allows for the ineffable and unexplainable and where emotions can circulate seemingly freely between characters. Yet, as Strether becomes more immersed into the Parisian lifestyle, intimate relationships, most notably his long-time friendship with Waymarsh, become unfamiliar, distorted, and unfathomable:

> What could it be, this disconcerting force? […] Waymarsh himself, for the occasion, was drawn into the eddy; it absolutely, though but temporarily, swallowed him down, and there were days when Strether seemed to bump against him as a sinking swimmer might brush a submarine object. […] our friend felt as if they passed each other, in their deep immersion, with the round impersonal eye of silent fish. (181)

As Strether becomes alienated from Waymarsh, the narrative voice refers to Strether as "our friend", establishing an affective community between the narrator, Strether, and the readers, eliciting sympathy and commiseration. Yet, in the first part of the passage, through the free indirect discourse that pushes the guiding narrative voice into the background, Strether's sense of disorientation and lack of control is all the more pronounced. There seems to emerge an unsurmountable distance between Strether and Waymarsh, who is "drawn into the eddy", the uncontrollable, massive force of the metropolitan city that threatens to tear the two friends apart. Strether, as a "sinking swimmer", loses control over his own body and surroundings, and the word "brush" reinforces his sense of impotence. The imagery of the "impersonal eye of a silent fish" evokes the detachment of the cosmopolitan *flâneur* who observes his surroundings in silence. For Strether, his cosmopolitan identity becomes disorienting as he is unable to encounter his friend in a meaningful way. In the "deep immersion" of the city, emotions cannot be transferred successfully; they are "swallowed" up and washed away, which prevents Strether from maintaining an affective bond with Waymarsh. Here, the novel shows the potentially dangerous effects of Parisian cosmopolitanism, a point which I will return to later.

The imagery of water and fluidity is a recurring theme associated with Strether's cosmopolitan identity throughout the novel. While his life in Paris is associated with the perpetual movement and flow of "the full grey-blue stream" (459), for his past and his lifestyle in Woollett, Strether often uses imagery that evokes a sense of stasis and inertia. In the novel's key scene – described as "the essence" of *The Ambassadors* in the 1908 preface (33) – Strether uses the metaphor of "a helpless jelly" to describe his experience of his past in Woollett to little Bilham:

> the affair of life – couldn't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at best a tin mould […] into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured – so that one "takes" the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it: one lives in fine as one can. […] Don't at any rate miss things out of stupidity. […] Do what you like so long as you don't make *my* mistake. (215-16, emphasis in original)

In contrast to Woollett, which enforces constraining boundaries on Strether's consciousness – here figured as a jelly which "both holds the shape of the mould and is held by it", turning embodiment into containment (Pettitt 146) – Paris is a place where consciousness is experienced as something – to use William James' words – that "flows" freely (239). Indeed, when Strether gazes at a river in the French countryside, he feels "at peace" (459) and experiences an inner harmony.

Yet, even as Strether describes the beneficial and calming effect of "the lap of water, the ripple of the surface" (459), the imagery of a dynamic river also alludes to a potentially disturbing effect. Namely, without the clear-drawn boundaries of the mould that give a sense of containment, if not security, to his sense of identity, Strether's self risks overflowing, dissolving in the worldliness of Paris that supposedly encompasses everything without limits. The longer Strether stays in Paris, the less he is able to comprehensively analyse and articulate his emotions, sensations, and experiences, which renders him unable to delineate a coherent sense of self. Throughout the novel, Strether remains untransparent and obscure, not only to himself and the other characters but also to the readers. As the narrator observes, "[a] thousand unuttered thoughts hummed for him in the air of these observations" (389) and his impressions become "too thick for prompt discrimination" (199). For readers, Strether is a slippery character, constantly eluding their grasp. As Chunlin Men describes, James presents "a non-habitable affect that frustrates easy emotional engagement and sympathetic identification" (37). Even Maria Gostrey, whom James describes as the novel's "ficelle" and "the reader's friend" (47), and who supposedly minimalizes "verbal and imaginative distance" (Yeazell 67), fails to enable the readers to create a coherent image of Strether. Indeed, the emotional bond between Strether and the worldly Maria is never consolidated, and Maria's unrequited love for Strether reinforces the instability of Strether's supposed cosmopolitan identity.

Strether's incomprehensibility of the metropolitan space also prevents him from maintaining an affective relationship with the novel's most prominent *femme du monde* (256), Madame de Vionnet. For Strether, Madame de Vionnet "was, like Cleopatra in the play, indeed various and multifold. […]. She was an obscure person, a muffled person one day, and a showy person, an uncovered person the next" (256). As a *femme du monde*, Madame de Vionnet is a dynamic, flexible, and ambiguous character who performs a multitude of identities, defying the nineteenth-century bourgeois ideal of female propriety.[4] As such, Madame de Vionnet is unfathomable for Strether – indeed, he is horrified when he learns about her sexual relationship with Chad – so that he is unable to affectively participate and share Madame de Vionnet's emotions when she has an emotional breakdown:

> A spasm came into her face, the tears she had already been unable to hide overflowed at first in silence, and then, as the sound suddenly comes from a child, quickened to gasps, to sobs. […] Her emotion was at first so incoherent that he could only stand there at a loss […]. He had to listen to her in silence that he made no immediate effort to attenuate, […] consenting to it as he had consented to the rest. (482-3)

Strether is at loss regarding how to mitigate Madame de Vionnet's grief and emotional pain; he casts himself into the role of a silent, emotionally detached observer. As with his relationship with Waymarsh discussed above, so here emotions cannot circulate between them in a meaningful way. Strether's perception of Madame de Vionnet as being like a "child" and her "incoherent" "gasps" and "sobs" demonstrate Strether's alienation from her. However, in contrast to his broken relationship with Waymarsh – within which Strether, rather than Waymarsh, is the emotionally suffering subject – here, Strether's passive consent highlights his lack of sympathy for the *femme du monde*, which is the result of his own evasive identity as a cosmopolitan *flâneur*. Strether's failure to display compassion towards Madame de Vionnet stands in strong contrast to the Baudelairean *flâneur*'s ability to empathise with others (Faradji 12) and to "inhabit multiple points of view" (Evangelista 2). For Baudelaire, cosmopolitanism describes a "heightened state of receptivity towards impressions and sensual stimuli" (Evangelista 3), which turns the cosmopolitan *flâneur* into the "spiritual

[4] For a discussion on cosmopolitanism and gender, see, for example, Janet Wolff's "The Invisible Flâneuse" or "The Feminine in Modern Art".

citizen of the universe" (Baudelaire 7). Unlike for Balestier and James himself, who, as described at the beginning, because of their "real cosmopolitan spirit" (James, "Wolcott Balestier" 47), possess a hypersensitivity to external stimuli, Strether here seems to be unable to affectively participate in his social environment. Yet, while Strether often fails to interact with other characters in Paris in an affectively positive way, as I will show in the next section, his relationship with his past is even more complex.

Grief, Guilt and Cosmopolitan *Flânerie*

In his speech to little Bilham discussed above, Strether's life advice to little Bilham is to "Live!" (216) and to "do what you like so long as you don't make *my* mistake" (215-16, emphasis in original). While Strether's speech echoes other literary speeches delivered by an older speaker to a younger listener – most notably Lord Henry Wotton's speech on youth in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) – here, as Glenn Clifton notes, James reverses the perspectives, focusing on the subjectivity of the aged speaker rather than the younger listener (284). However, while Clifton reads this scene as a critical comment on the loss of aesthetic experience as put forward by Decadent artists, I argue that it is much more about affective loss, particularly Strether's sense of grief and guilt. Indeed, whereas Strether here remains obscure about his past "mistake", earlier in the novel, he briefly mentions the death of his late wife and son, suggesting his complicity in his infant son's death:

> the pale figure of his real youth […] held against its breast the two presences paler than itself – the young wife he had lost and the young son he had stupidly sacrificed. He had again and again made out for himself that he might have kept his little boy […] if he had not in those years so insanely given himself to merely missing the mother. […] he had been banished and neglected, mainly because the father had been unwittingly selfish. This was doubtless but the secret habit of sorrow. (114-5)

As in his speech above, in which Strether laments his past "stupidity", here he describes his son's death as a stupid sacrifice. To some extent, Strether seems to experience an emotional detachment from his deceased family, which is underlined by his claim that the events of his

past "were but parenthetic memories" (182). Yet, there is also an acute sense of Strether's ever-present grief and guilt, and his statement that he "had again and again made out for himself" that his son would still be alive if he had acted differently highlights Strether's own masochistic punishment: he transforms himself into a scapegoat even as he acknowledges that, in fact, he could not have saved his son, who died of diphtheria. Strether's reflection here is about his failure to successfully transform his grief for his wife into love for his son – in other words, it is about an ill-timed detachment, which has now been transformed into a detachment of a more excessive kind: a desire for a complete rupture with his past.

How does Strether's relationship to his past, then, relate to his cosmopolitan identity? One way of accounting for Strether's cosmopolitan *flânerie* is reading it as a psychological defence mechanism. Strether's cosmopolitan identity is a role which he performs in order to assuage his guilty conscience regarding his son's death. During his walks through the streets of Paris, Strether acquires a new sense of presentness that disrupts any emotional bonds with his tragic past. Indeed, when Strether and Waymarsh are on their way to little Bilham, time almost stands still:

> They walked, wandered, wondered, and, a little, lost themselves; Strether hadn't had for years so rich a consciousness of time […]. He had known nothing and nobody as he stood in the street; but hadn't his view now taken a bound in the direction of everyone and of everything? (135-6)

The intense experience of the present time through aimless walking transforms Strether into a 'citizen of nowhere' who is connected to "everyone" and "everything." While R. W. Stallman claims that Strether fails to experience "time in its point-present nowness" (43), it is precisely through his distinct consciousness of presentness that Strether attempts to break free from his sorrowful past and, as I will demonstrate below, can engage with a past that is not his own.

In *The Arcades Project* (1982), Walter Benjamin describes the *flâneur's* relationship to time: "The street conducts the *flâneur* into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward […] into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own" (416). Through his cosmopolitan *flânerie* Strether attempts to create a past

that is not his own, one that is therefore detached from his family's death. Strether's vision of an anonymous, impersonal past is most striking in one of the novel's final scenes, in which Strether has a sudden perception of the French Revolution: "from a great distance […] came, as if excited and exciting, the vague voices of Paris. Strether had all along been subject to sudden gusts of fancy in connexion with such matters as these"; he suddenly sensed "the smell of revolution, the smell of the public temper – or perhaps simply the smell of blood" (475). Strether no longer encounters his own personal past but a national past that supersedes any connections he has to his deceased family. However, like James himself, who on his travels through Paris re-embodied "the bloody traces of the past" (Coghlan 243), Strether thoroughly immerses himself in the past event. Strether's distinctly visceral experience of it – he senses the "smell of blood" and hears the "voices of Paris" – shows that unlike the cosmopolitan *flâneur*, who ultimately remains a detached observer, Strether experiences "a multi-sensory overload" (Coghlan 243). Strether's attempt to experience a detached past fails; his identity as a cosmopolitan *flâneur* is only performative.

Deceptive Cosmopolitanism and Affective Disconnection Across Geographical Boundaries

Strether's self-deceptive cosmopolitanism prevents him not only from effectively transcending temporal boundaries but also from negotiating geographical borders. Indeed, while Strether does not succeed in his attempt to break free from his tragic past through cosmopolitan *flânerie*, he is equally unable to maintain his relationship with his present fiancée, Mrs Newsome. Even though Mrs Newsome is never physically present in Paris, Strether nevertheless clearly perceives her influence, which increasingly becomes a nuisance to him: he finds "this ghost of the lady of Woollett more importunate than any other presence" (303). Paris as a space of seemingly unlimited freedom is incompatible with the rigid Puritan norms of New England as embodied by Mrs Newsome. Clearly, Mrs Newsome represents an obstacle to Strether's desire to rediscover and reshape his identity, as her ever-lasting ghostly presence does not allow him to fully rupture with his past life in America. The spectral quality of her presence suggests an unsettling uncanniness, a disturbance he cannot avoid nor control. Here, the familiar and familial become strange and disturbing. It seems as if Mrs Newsome's spectral presence attaches itself to Strether's identity in an unhealthy way and prevents him from developing independently.

Unlike his relationships with other characters, Strether's contact with Mrs Newsome throughout the novel is established solely via letters and telegrams, so that despite her physical absence, Mrs Newsome's "circuitous presence is felt as pulsatingly 'intense' and oddly embodied" (Pettitt 148-149). Through her letters and telegrams, Mrs Newsome aims to exercise full control over Strether's life and the events in Paris – the telegraph becomes associated with "coercive instrumentality" (Goble 420) and the "General Post-Office" (183) with disturbing compression. Not only in *The Ambassadors* but throughout James' other works– and especially in his novella *In the Cage* (1898) – postal technologies play a key role in characters' relationships. In *In the Cage*, while the telegrams at first seem to reinforce intimacies between the lovers – "it was just the talk […] of the very happiest people" (21) – over the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that the writers experience a relationship conflict, and it is this harmful potential of telegrams and letters that is also key to Strether's relationship with Mrs Newsome.

From the very beginning, Strether delays reading Mrs Newsome's letters that he receives when he arrives in Paris. Instead of reading the letters at the post office where he collects them, Strether decides to go on a prolonged walk through Paris, which marks the start of his cosmopolitan *flânerie*: he "set[s] himself to walk again", looks at the shop windows, "[indulges] […] in a sudden pause before the book-stalls" along the river, and ultimately "lingeres" in the garden of the Tuileries (111). When Strether finally does read the letters, he "[holds] them there, lost in thought" and reflects on "the strange logic of his finding himself so free" (112). Despite the embodied presence of Mrs Newsome through her letters, Strether contemplates the great "difference" (112) that sets the two apart. He feels a sudden sense of freedom, knowing that the geographical distance between himself and his fiancée "formed [an] escape" into his newly assumed cosmopolitan identity (112). As the novel progresses, this emotional distance between the two characters is intensified through Mrs Newsome's increasing silence, which ultimately leads to complete "intermission" (333). Indeed, when Strether and Chad later talk about their present situation and possible future, Strether notices how he has drifted away from Mrs Newsome: "It was as if Mrs Newsome had somehow been placed by the words very far off" (431). Strether cannot imagine a future with Mrs Newsome, and he linguistically expulses her from his life. He has no words left to describe their

relationship, which becomes meaningless and drained of emotion. Because of his emotional disconnection with Mrs Newsome, Strether experiences “a finer harmony in things” and “his tension was relaxed” (454-5), which suggests a successful separation from his American life.

Strether’s decision at the end to leave Paris and return to Woollett despite his emotional detachment from Mrs Newsome and his love for the Parisian lifestyle is, thus, all the more striking. It seems that Strether himself ultimately remains unconvinced of the cosmopolitan identity he pretends to possess. Strether’s preference for his life in Woollett over that in Paris demonstrates that his project of identity transformation has ultimately failed. He is not a ‘citizen of the world’ but remains rooted in his hometown. Strether’s own lack of explanation for his departure from Paris and the novel’s open ending – we do not learn whether Strether and Mrs Newsome get back together or not – ultimately leave the complex and fraught intersection of cosmopolitanism and affect underexplored. Strether’s increasing affective detachment from Mrs Newsome leaves it doubtful whether Strether’s tragic loss of his late family can ultimately be transformed into an alternative affective relationship with Mrs Newsome. As the novel suggests, while cosmopolitanism does offer imaginative freedom, it cannot compensate for or restore emotional loss.

Conclusion

Strether’s unsuccessful cosmopolitanism speaks to James’ wider interest in the theme of failure. While *The Ambassadors* at first seems to offer an alternative account of cosmopolitanism to that depicted in James’ earlier work, one in which an aged – instead of a young – character seems to succeed in his identity transformation, this is ultimately undermined by Strether’s inability to truly assimilate into Parisian culture and abandon his Puritan ideology. Strether’s acute sense of sorrow and guilt can be read as a critique of the cosmopolitan *flâneur*, who possesses a level of detachment that is not desirable and that risks preventing him from experiencing any emotions at all. By precluding Strether from developing a successful cosmopolitan identity, the novel makes clear that cosmopolitanism is not a valid means to circumvent the inevitable experiences of failure and loss. The novel thus levels a critique against cosmopolitanism’s seeming universalism that tends to promote an abstract ideal that disregards the cosmopolite’s individual emotions and sensations – a fundamentally

unethical way of living as this does not allow him to respond morally to his past and social environment.

Already in his "Occasional Paris", published twenty-five years earlier, James presents a critique of Parisian cosmopolitanism, denouncing the cosmopolitan Paris Exposition of 1878 in light of the various conflicts around the world: "The moment certainly does not seem very well chosen […] The world is too much occupied with graver cares – with reciprocal cannonading and chopping, with cutting of throats and burning of homes" (79). James describes cosmopolitanism in aesthetic terms, criticising how cosmopolitan pleasure – the visitors' admiration for the "magnificent and fantastical" buildings (79) – cannot account for the ongoing political tensions and violence around the world. In other words, for James, the Parisian cosmopolite is a failed figure. Unlike the Baudelairean cosmopolitan *flâneur*, who is capable of empathising with others, James describes a cosmopolitan experience that prevents such sympathetic generosity that transcends national boundaries. Strether's failure to maintain affective relationships with his Parisian cosmopolitan friends and his decision to return to Woollett suggests that, for James, Parisian cosmopolitanism is not as inclusive and diverse as it pretends to be but built on a worldliness that is deceiving; the novel thus problematises rather than romanticises national boundaries. Ultimately, Paris cannot provide the necessary transnational space for Strether to break free from his Puritan morals and immerse himself in Parisian culture. Strether thus experiences an identity crisis and fails to navigate his emotional environment, so that, rather than facilitating transnational sympathy, Strether's sense of cosmopolitanism prevents affective bonding.

While James has become an important figure to critics in a wide range of literary fields, including travel writing, critical race theory, and the poetics of emotion, teasing out his ambiguous stance on the emotional politics of cosmopolitanism is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of James' world view. Reading *The Ambassadors* thus prompts us to reconsider our understanding of nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism. While the nineteenth century is widely seen as a "core period in the emergence of an increasingly interconnected world" (Huber and Jansen 41), *The Ambassadors* complicates this idea, suggesting that what might at first be seen as inclusive and interconnected might not, in fact, be so. In James' world, affective relationships cannot transcend temporal and geographical boundaries. Strether's

futile attempt to develop a cosmopolitan identity comes at the cost of his emotional bonds with other characters. In the end, Strether is “intensely away, away to a distance and alone” (497). Balestier’s “cosmopolitan spirit” (James, “Wolcott Balestier” 47), which James so admired and considered to be a “revitalizing force” (Evangelista 182), ultimately proves to be a hollow concept. In a world of infinite interconnectedness, cosmopolitanism and emotional attachment seem to be incompatible.

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