

**Americans in Paris, Paris in Americans: Symbolic Geography in the Novels of  
Henry James**  
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“Tourist folklore,” writes Barthes<sup>1</sup>, reduces Paris to its Tower and its Cathedral - symbols of the past and of modernity. Barthes divides the city into three zones representing the three functions of human life: Montmartre at the top representing pleasure, the center, around the Opéra, representing “materiality, business, commerce,” and at the bottom, the Pantheon, representing knowledge and study. But American writers have projected their own deeply symbolic meanings onto the layout of France’s capital, and over the past two centuries, even as the geography of Paris itself changed radically, the city’s geography as depicted in expatriate fiction has remained surprisingly constant. This paper traces the most notable of these constants – the polarization of the city into two very different spaces - to the early and later writings of Henry James, looking at his short story “Madame de Mauves” and his later novel *The Ambassadors*.<sup>2</sup> It is hoped that by explaining James’s influence on later fictional depictions of Paris, readers will understand that the fictionalization of “foreign” spaces not only allows a writer to project his or her own psychic narratives onto the landscape, but that these narratives are often influenced or even formatted by previous generations of writers.

Fictional depictions of a foreign city’s layout often have more to do with the psychological projections of expatriates than with the city’s actual geography. The language of place described by J. Gerald Kennedy is particularly evident in expatriate fiction, where the writer is often more highly aware of place, being in unfamiliar

surroundings and often deprived full use of the local language. Often what a writer doesn't know about a place, or only senses dimly, can allow a place to more freely mean what he wants. Places in Paris for American writers thus depend less on collective cultural or historical meaning, and instead often represent personal meanings specific to expatriates – the psychological states of individuals who have been drawn here either for what they cannot find at home, or because of what they seek to escape there. In Paris, where almost any given location is already so highly charged with symbolic significance, a fictional character's movements through the city can often be read as a narrative in themselves.

The city itself, base for these psychic projections, is built on and divided by a west-flowing river. At the center of this river are two islands, and arrondissements spiral outward from the main island clockwise, as if the whole city were a mandala with different monuments, churches, and quarters marking its outward progression. Broad avenues frame monuments so one can watch them approaching or receding, the way events in one's life appear or move away, showing different aspects of themselves when viewed from different points. At the western boundary of the city the great white doorway of the Arc de Triomphe leads to a garden/forest, to the East, a column marks the site of an ancient prison, while cemeteries form an enormous backward "C" around the city's eastern side: the Cimetières Parisien des Batignolles, Montmartre, Père Lachaise, Gentilly, and Montparnasse. Near its former *peripherique* the city is ringed with train stations, each of which has lines going outward in different directions - north, south, east, and west, to the capital's provinces. The modern city is surrounded by two vast circular rings, the inner and outer *peripheriques*. *Rond-points* within this boundary mimic the

greater circles without, yet despite these curvilinear gestures, it remains for the most part a city of spires and points.

This grouping of monuments is the set on which hundreds of American fictions have been played out. Characters move, interact with each other, meet with tragedy or happiness somewhere within these markers and spaces. No American writer prior to James had dealt with the city as completely or imposed over it such a strong polarity. James's geography of Paris as a city of polar opposites, as both the birthplace of modernity and home to an impenetrably complex Old World culture, differs from the Gothic versions of Paris depicted by his predecessors Edgar Allan Poe or Washington Irving, and marks the beginning of a fictional mapping of the city that has remained largely in place since, even as the city itself changed.

### **Madame de Mauves**

Written in 1873, three years before *The American* (1876-77), and thirty before *The Ambassadors* (1903), "Madame de Mauves" shows the beginnings of a mapping and polarization of Paris in James's fiction. In each of these three of James's works the picture of Paris becomes progressively complex (and each of the protagonists is progressively older), but this earliest is perhaps most interesting to examine because of its simplicity. Here, polarization is mainly East/West. As opposed to the more complex Paris of *The Ambassadors*, there are only four major locations where scenes take place: in Saint-Germain-en-Laye and its park; in the countryside; in a very generalized, usually nocturnal or twilight Paris; and in the Bois de Boulogne [IX]. Though Paris is the central location where life goes on, the story's protagonists are voluntarily removed from it. To

the west, St.-Germain and its innocent park are a viewing point for this life. The Bois, still west of Paris, and yet very much still a part of it, is a debaucherous forest, a perverted version of the simple park in St. Germain, where French noblemen go to dine with their mistresses. Paris, furthest east of all, is an urban version of the Bois with none of nature's consolations, dark, mazy, feminine, and cynical.

Paris here is nearly as sinister as James could have made it. For Madame de Mauves Paris represents the landscape her husband retires to to seduce other women - note, in the opening paragraph, as quoted above, the city itself is described as a prostrate woman. If Paris is not actually embodied by a single Parisienne in James's fiction, we can at least be sure something in the city will most certainly involve a woman.<sup>3</sup>

Just as to the west of Paris lies the Bois de Boulogne, "behind" and also west of Saint-Germain-en-Laye is its own forest, where Longmore and Madame de Mauves have their simple, innocent conversations. While they are busy testing the limits of their own American-styled Puritanism, M. de Mauves is in the Bois with his mistress, and James even gives us a scene where Longmore with a shock witnesses M. de Mauves giving his mistress a kiss on her bare back in one of the park's restaurant. (The Bois here serves as the *dolce loco* of the voyeur, but is certainly no *locus amoenus*.) Apart from all this, in quite another world, is the countryside beyond Paris, where Longmore walks and witnesses, in a more pure and contextless space, the equally startling, but somehow more purely-intentioned ramblings of a landscape painter and his own mistress. Here, James seems to be saying, in the uncorrupted French countryside, away from contaminating Paris, strange things do go on, but they are simpler things, and, if not wholly within the

range of average 19<sup>th</sup> century American moral standards, at least are fundamentally honest.

James's own personal travel descriptions of rural France give us much the same picture of his ideas of the French country, and when the characters in his other books involving Paris go to the country we can rest assured that their pleasures there are simple, honest ones. James describes no trysts in Arles, no dangerous forebodings in Rouen, nothing to indicate a character's fundamental shiftings in Chartres or La Rochelle. An exception to this is when Chad Newsome is at first mysteriously away in Cannes "with a woman," and yet even this affair is carefully veiled and idealized. Saint-Germain-en-Laye, only "half an hour [from] the boulevards," (and thus half an hour closer to America) is already far away enough from Paris to make it, by comparison, infinitely safer. Madame de Mauves describes her home here as being, "not America, perhaps . . . but . . . quite as little France. France is out there, beyond the garden, in the town . . . in my mind, [St.-Germain is] a nameless country of my own."<sup>4</sup> This telling quote presents in a more tragic mode the same hybrid area represented by Chad Newsome's apartment within Paris - a place in Paris, taking from the city, unarguably of it, and yet with a firm claim laid on the space by an American - a reclaimed Paris, an enclave made into foreign territory as carefully and preciously held onto as any stake of claimed land colonized before in the wilderness of North America. And so there are hybrid places in Paris - places not completely French and neither American, that serve writers as metaphors for America when characters need to interact in an American space in Paris, when a writer cannot justify an actual trip across the ocean for his characters. The countryside outside the city is the easiest space to neutralize in this way. But areas within the city can also

serve as neutral spaces, and, after James, the crossing of the Seine makes for the most common metaphor for the crossing of an ocean of cultural divides.

### **The Ambassadors**

James's *The Ambassadors* further develops the polarity of Paris laid out in "Madame de Mauves," this time fixing it not on the corrupt city and its innocent suburbs, but on the dangerous, sophisticated, artistic and aristocratic Left Bank, and the respectable, working bourgeois world of the Right Bank. The plot here is meanwhile based not so much on the character or development of its hero Chad Newsome, but on where, geographically, he ought to be placed – either in Paris or in America. Chad, who has already traveled widely in France, and has previously kept an apartment on the Left Bank, lives, throughout the duration of the novel, on the Boulevard Malesherbes [I], a wide, airy street in the newly Huysmanized quarter of the city. While his family, anxious in America, fears he may have become bohemianized, we realize, when the map is laid out, that he is actually living a bit further West than Strether, the "ambassador" his mother sends to fetch Chad home. Strether arrives in Paris to find Chad more willing than expected to return. Strether, who schemes to keep himself and Chad longer in Paris and, in the end, outstays Chad himself, takes up residence, a little southeast of Chad's apartment, on the rue de la Paix [II]. The names of the streets themselves linguistically infer quite a bit: Strether on the rue de la Paix has come as a peacemaker, and the "mal" in "Malesherbes" seems to infer everyone's worst fears about the overdue Chad. The less French an American writer knows the more French place-names seem to resonate with significance.

Both Chad's artist-gone-native friend Bilham and the French characters in the novel live on the Left Bank, and any time James needs to thrust his visiting Americans into the most mercilessly un-American side of Paris, he sends them there.

Strether is immediately comfortable in Chad's apartment, which represents the ideal hybrid of French and American, on the Right Bank. He is most uncomfortable at Madame de Vionnet's in the rue de la Bellechasse [III], the ultimate, enclosed, completely Left Bank French interior.

More telling yet are the placements of Madame de Vionnet's apartment and Strether's hotel. Strether's on rue de la Paix, is nearly on the same axis as de Vionnet's rue de Bellechasse home - walking between the two streets one could go from one to the other in a nearly direct line across the Pont Solerfino [IV]. Their residences are also equidistant from the Tuilleries Garden, where Strether on his first day in Paris makes a note of the absence of the Tuilleries Palace [V], that great series of rooms which once connected the north and south wings of the Louvre, burned some thirty years before *The Ambassadors* was published. The absence of the palace is one of his very first impressions of the city. James offhandedly has Miss Barrace tell us her father was the "American Minister to the Tuilleries," which tells us that the palace was once a diplomatic meeting-ground for Americans and French. Strether and Madame de Vionnet, ostensible combatants for the placement of Chad, live equidistant from the site of a vast, ruined palace which was once the place of diplomatic relationships between Europeans and North Americans. The novel's plot, to a great degree, hinges on the diplomatic relations between Strether and de Vionnet - that the place where similar relations and diplomatic maneuverings were traditionally undertaken is at the time of the action only a

phantom palace gives us a foreshadowing of what the outcome of Strether's and de Vionnet's bargaining will be - if we read the geographic signifiers involved. If the river is the dividing line between a symbolic America on the Right Bank and a symbolic Paris of the Left, that they are placed equidistant from the dividing line along the same axis says something about their positions.

Waymarsh finds "stations of relief"<sup>5</sup> in the rue Scribe [VI] (the very heart of "Anglo-American tourist-land"<sup>6</sup>). Calling his bank a "post of superior observation,"<sup>7</sup> Waymarsh finds traveling to the Left Bank an unpleasant experience. James's protagonists often seek a perch, a place within Paris, but not quite of it, from which to regard the city and from which to gain a better perspective of their own lives there. Strether may almost literally perch himself on Chad's balcony, while in "Madame de Mauves," Longmore and Madame de Mauves herself try to gain a distance and better view of the city from the terrace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. If there is one overriding, constant symbol of Paris in the minds of American fiction writers it is perhaps the superior view, which gives the viewer a rare chance to make visual sense of the monument-laden maze of symbols from above.

Notre Dame [VII] is where Strether meets Madame de Vionnet for the first time in neutral territory. Whereas before in their meetings each of them has been guarded, in the cathedral on the island they seem to meet on equal terms at last, and, quite symbolically, they move off together afterward not to the Right, but to the Left Bank to dine, a move which marks Strether's quick sympathy to his original adversary's position. This section of the novel is marked by Strether's doubts about bringing Chad back post haste, and that he "crosses the river" again, this time with Madame de Vionnet, moving



into her own territory, is significant. That James first describes the couple making a circle around the cathedral as they try to form the terms of their relationship is no less significant.

The Luxembourg Gardens [VIII] are Strether's first destination and where he has his initial almost epiphanetic vision of a Paris that might be at once charming, romantic, and wholesome. It is most certainly of the Left Bank, and yet it is a haven at once a part of and separated from the confusing and complex Left Bank world, and one in which he feels as immediately comfortable as he does in his other ideal location - Chad's apartment. What similarities are there between Chad Newsome's "continuous balcony"<sup>8</sup> on the Boulevard Malesherbes, where one can give "himself up to watching the life below,"<sup>9</sup> and Madame de Mauves's St. Germain terrace, from which "Paris lies spread before you in dusky vastness, domed and fortified, glittering here and there through her light vapors, and girdled with her silver Seine"<sup>10</sup> Certainly the two Parises they overlook make for one of the major differences. One is James's Paris of 1873, the other of 1902-3. James attempted to settle in Paris permanently before moving on to live finally in London. "Madame de Mauves" corresponds to this first, earlier period when he was most frustrated with the city.

Another neutral ground for Anglo-Gallic liaisons, the Louvre, is perched on the northern side of the Seine, and depicted as a safe meeting-ground for French and Anglo-Saxons, a place where Americans make an easy acquaintance with the safest and most clinical aspects of French culture. (In *The American* it was the meeting ground of the American protagonist and his first French contact). French culture is encapsulated here, made safe and easy to swallow.

In general, the American tourists in James's novels set in Paris cling to the triangle between the Arc de Triomphe and the Louvre and the Opera, what Edwin Fussell calls "Anglo-Saxon tourist land." Moving out of this area in any direction means risking a move into disorienting and usually (morally or physically) dangerous surroundings. These boundaries will expand slightly over the next hundred years in later American writings, but the idea that moving out of the center of American activities in the city is a (often morally) dangerous move will stand.

From James future writers were better able to map out the territory their characters would inhabit, however much Paris itself changed in the meantime. The Right Bank near the Opéra remained, even for writers as late as James Salter or Mavis Gallant, and especially for those of the era of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, a safe, urban Anglo-American space (even if, in reality, most areas of the Left Bank were at that time equally modern and bourgeois). The Left Bank is James's "Artists' Quarter," an area Americans abroad would within fifty years annex for themselves, today one of the city's most expensive shopping districts, has, in American fiction (though certainly not in French), still not lost its edge of wild adventure and bohemianism. The Luxembourg Gardens remain for most contemporary writers a "safe" place from which to observe Paris without necessarily becoming entangled in its culture oneself, as a place (as it was for Strether) for reflection and recollection - and in particular a place from which to look back on one's personal past. Depictions of children are more repeated in the Luxembourg Gardens than in any other place in the city: lost children for Richard Ford, mysterious children for Fitzgerald, child-like prostitutes for Hemingway and Jean Rhys. The Seine, largely ignored by expatriate writers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, will, after James, come to

be more and more defined as the dividing line between the dangerous, corrupting south side of the city and the safe “Americanized” spaces of the north.

James’s model of Paris proved hard to ignore for future writers, and set the axis of Paris in a way that was to become familiar to readers for the next century, as authors like Fitzgerald, Hemingway, James Baldwin, Mavis Gallant, and later Richard Ford, Ward Just, and Diane Johnson elaborated James’s sharply defined poles of the city that sit in binary opposition, with the Seine forming a firm border between the two, and a high degree of significance placed on the crossing of bridges between the two sides of the city.

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes, Roland, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, (trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1979) 12.

<sup>2</sup> James returned to Europe for the first time since his childhood in the spring of 1869. He moved permanently to Europe six years later, intending to live in Paris and moving there in 1875, but deciding finally in 1876 to move to London, where he settled for good. “Madame de Mauves” was written in the summer of 1873 and published in a volume with other stories in 1875.

<sup>3</sup> America, too, is often personified as a woman. Throughout *The Ambassadors* Mrs. Newsome, the great mother-across-the-ocean, becomes almost synonymous with the United States.

<sup>4</sup> James, *Complete Stories 1864-1874* 848.

<sup>1</sup> James, *The Ambassadors* 52.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin Sill Fussell, *The French Side of Henry James* (NY: Columbia U P, 1990) 136.

<sup>7</sup> James, *The Ambassadors* 52.

<sup>8</sup> James, *The Ambassadors* 64.

<sup>9</sup> James, *The Ambassadors* 65.

<sup>10</sup> Henry James, *Complete Stories 1864-1874* (NY: The Library of America, 1999) 828.

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