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Imagination, Possibilities and Aspects in Literary Fiction

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ABSTRACT. This paper is about imagination and possibilities in literature and moral life. Literature and moral life both involve imagination because, at different levels of agency, considering possibilities helps us to take decisions and, at the same time, helps us to reinforce the reasons for acting. My first thesis in this paper is that this process may be explained in terms of a theory of aspects: it is significant that one thing resulting from the experience of imaginative opening is often a particular *aspect*. However, the task of understanding imagination “*sub specie possibilitate*” entails two kinds of dangers: *hypothesisism* (“we need to see”) and *epiphanism* (“we do not need to see”). I will formulate a second thesis, following an idea of Nussbaum: that literary features intervene relevantly in the building of the device which promotes the aesthetic-moral experience of the novel. And there is a source of the *philosophical* interest in the novel, not a mere affair of literary *technique*. My focus on some examples from *The Portrait of a Lady* aims to be a proof of it insofar as the complex relationship between hypothesis (*seeing as*) and aspects (*seeing*), and consequently the dangers of *hypothesisism* and *epiphanism*, may be clarified from the point of view of the novel. I will consider three levels in *The Portrait of a Lady* concerning the interplay of imagination, possibilities, hypothesis and aspects: the level of the poetics of a novel, the inner level of the characters, and the level of the

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aesthetic experience of the reader.

This paper is about imagination and possibilities in literature and moral life.

First of all, I would like to say that some respected scholars in the philosophy of literature, as Jacques Bouveresse, Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond, share their interest on the role of imagination in both domains (literature and moral life).

On the other hand, there is a very intuitive idea that imagining involves, in a very relevant sense, managing possibilities. But possibilities come into play concerning imagination in very different ways. Somebody having to take a decision about how to conduct himself in a particular situation can imagine possible scenes depending on the consequences of possible decisions, or may imagine possible reactions of himself after having taken this or that decision. The writer of a novel imagines what would happen if the character acted this way or that way and can imagine possible contexts for their characters matching with their personalities and, at the same time, shaping their personalities for the reader, who in turn imagines possible looking, possible reactions, and possible endings. The vast concept of imagination, which is so variable in the history of aesthetics, can be demarcated by means of its relationship with possibilities. Literature and moral life both involve imagination because, at different levels of agency, considering possibilities helps us to take decisions and, at the same time, helps us to reinforce the reasons for acting.

Jacques Bouveresse (Bouveresse 2008) thinks that this is the clue to the link between literature (that is, the imaginative description of facts and situations) and life. Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1990) thinks that novels and their writing style are an indispensable part of moral philosophy, just because that style is very different from the style of philosophical writings (treatises). For Cora Diamond (Diamond 1996), the imaginative description by Socrates in Plato's *Crito* is a good example of exercising moral creativity.

Scholars, such as the ones mentioned agree on the idea that moral thinking is not merely consisting of choosing between previous given possibilities, nor the application of rules or principles to a particular situation. The *seeing* of possibilities arises as a process of transformation of our perception of things, and that process works under pressure. In Cora Diamond's words: "Seeing the possibilities in things is a matter of a kind of transforming perception of them" (Diamond 1996, 313). My first thesis in this paper is that this process may be explained in terms of a theory of aspects: it is significant that one thing resulting from the experience of imaginative opening is often a particular *aspect*. In turn, the working of imagination in literature and moral life has something important to teach us about the theory of aspects in aesthetic understanding, at least.

However, the task of understanding imagination "*sub specie possibilitate*" entails two kinds of dangers which I will try to reveal next. I will call these two kinds of dangers *hypothesisism* and *epiphanism*.

In order to explain them, I need to underline just two features of my theory of aspects that are especially relevant for my argument:

1. When I see something under a new aspect, I see that it has not changed while we have been looking at it and yet the way in which we see it has changed.

2. The aspect is something *seen* and not merely *considered*. It works differently to hypothesis: I can consider a hypothesis even if I am never able to *see* it.

Both dangers (*hypothesism* and *epiphanism*) are based on those features. In fact, they seem to be two sides of the same coin: the first one says “we need to see”, the second one says “we do not need to see”.

Hypothesim happens when we ignore the experiential (or perceptual) character of the dawning of an aspect, even if the dawning of an aspect is not the currency in aesthetic experiences. We need to see: that is, the dawning of an aspect implies an experience, not a mere logical consideration. Imagine, for example, someone saying “I understand your proposal of seeing the duck-rabbit as a head turned to the right, but I cannot come to see the rabbit.” In aesthetic situations, we may say, for example, “My student of oboe class does not really come to see the meaning of *expressivo* in Mozart’s passages even though he has perfectly imitated my *vibrato* a moment ago”.

Epiphanism happens when we forget that we can consider a hypothesis without gaining access to a new *seeing* (that is, an aspect). In that

case, we do not need to see. The dawning of an aspect is a crucial and very characteristic phenomenon at the heart of aesthetic understanding, but we are not experiencing a constant dawning of an aspect phenomena (fortunately) in our aesthetic life. In other words, every *seeing as* (hypothesis) is not equivalent to a new *seeing* (an aspect), even if the hypothesis logically (and phenomenologically) precedes the dawning of an aspect. If I am a lover of classical music, I am not constantly rediscovering Beethoven every time I listen to Beethoven, even if there is the possibility that sometimes something could push me to say “Now, I see Beethoven differently” and this is a central characteristic of aesthetic understanding. In aesthetic situations we are perfectly able to consider a hypothesis about the possible developments of a work or even about the meaning or the consequences of an element without the need of seeing it as a whole aspect or as a change of the current aspect. So that is why we say, for example, “I see exactly the point of your proposal in order to understand X, but I cannot see the work that way” or, another example, “I see the options that the theme opens up (in music) or the plot opens up (in a novel), and I see how the author breaks down expectations”.

Before plunging into *The Portrait of a Lady*, I will formulate a second thesis, following an idea of Nussbaum: that literary features intervene relevantly in the building of the device which promotes the aesthetic-moral experience of the novel. And there is a source of the *philosophical* interest in the novel, not a mere affair of literary *technique*. My focus on *The*

Portrait of a Lady aims to be a proof of it insofar as the complex relationship between hypothesis (*seeing as*) and aspects (*seeing*), and consequently the dangers of *hypothetism* and *epiphanyism*, may be clarified from the point of view of the novel, even though, clarifying is often to show the complexity of something. Obviously, imagination and aspects are not synonymous. The dawning of an aspect is just a kind of imaginative phenomenon and that also means that it is just a kind of articulation between imagination and possibilities.

There are three levels (at least) in a novel concerning the interplay of imagination, possibilities, hypothesis and aspects:

1. The level of the poetics of a novel (that is, the author's creative mechanisms).
2. The inner level of the characters (inside the novel).
3. The level of the aesthetic experience of the reader.

Let's start at the first level, concerning the poetics of novel by James and especially in the case of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Summing up greatly, *The Portrait of a Lady* is the story of Isabel Archer, a young American girl who has just arrived to her aunt and uncle's home in England. Isabel must decide about her future, including various offers of marriage. She finally decides to marry, but her married life is unhappy. As the novel progresses, the development of events and of personal relationships make Isabel mature and makes she see her life and her personal environment in a new light.

Isabel Archer is a character repeatedly described by the narrator and by the rest of the characters of the novel referring a distinctive trait: her imagination. Nevertheless, imagination has a very varied range of meanings (referring to Isabel and the rest of the characters, and also in the non-fiction texts of James): to put yourself in somebody else's shoes (that is empathy), to have wit and curiosity referring to objects such as art or conversation, capacity for being excited about our future in life, capacity for fantasy (of course), longing for freedom (in a woman, especially), etc.

Henry James, in his Preface to the New York Edition version (1908) of *The Portrait of a Lady*, says:

The point is, however, that this single small corner-stone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny, had begun with being all my outfit for the large building of "The Portrait of a Lady." (James 1908, xii)

The paradox of the artist (a kind of *petitio principii*) is, for James, that the writer needs to have (and he has, in fact) a vivid figure as the main character (Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*) even before having submitted her to the "business of placing" the character (James 1908, xi). In other words, James's acquisition of his main formal procedure, "the grasp of a single character", must be somehow previous to his immersion into the set of characters, circumstances and events composing the "human scene" (James 1908, xii), the same human scene which James wants to reveal just by

means of the formal procedure actually being shaped in the process of immersion itself. The answer, a partial one at least, is that the writer's imagination masters some elements coming from the artist's life experience (we cannot avoid thinking here in the biographic inspiration of Minnie Temple, James's cousin) in order to build a figure which has

[...] BEEN placed —placed in the imagination that detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it, conscious of its presence in the dusky, crowded, heterogeneous back-shop of the mind". (James 1908, xiii)

But to try to describe that process of imagining, that process of "logical accretion" by which "this slight 'personality', the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl" was "to find itself endowed with the high attributes of a Subject", would imply to

do so subtle, if not so monstrous, a thing as to write the history of the growth of one's imagination. (James 1908, xii-xiii)

What is the *aspectist* status of that figure? Is it an aspect or rather a hypothesis? In a sense, the writer *sees* Isabel before writing *The Portrait of a Lady*, but in another sense Isabel's character is the result of building *The Portrait of a Lady* and can't really be *seen* before it. Must we postulate maybe an intermediate category, a kind of *proto-aspect* or a kind of *super-hypothesis*, in order to made account for it?

Let's go to the second level, concerning the inner level of the characters (inside the novel).

Henry James values a particular moment of seeing by Isabel as "the best thing in the book" but at the same time as "only a supreme illustration of the general plan". (James 1908, xxi). He says:

It was designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture. She [Isabel] sits up, by her dying fire, far into the night, under the spell of recognitions on which she finds the last sharpness suddenly wait. It is a representation simply of her motionlessly SEEING, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as "interesting" as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate. (James 1908, xxi)

James refers to chapter 42. Isabel is overwhelmed because of the words of her husband, Gilbert Osmond. He has asked Isabel to use her influence over lord Warburton, her old rejected suitor, in order to persuade him to marry Pansy, the young Osmond daughter and Isabel's stepdaughter, who loves another man. Isabel and Osmond's married couple's life is unhappy. Isabel spends the night after the conversation reflecting and trying to evaluate the causes of their failed marriage. But there is something overriding all the causes, judgments and reasons: a mental image, a remembered image which closes the chapter, the image of Osmond and madame Merle, the common friend of both, "unconsciously and familiarly associated" (James 1908, 205).

Indeed, in chapter 40 Isabel founded Osmond and madame Merle in an apparently current salon scene, but the position of the bodies, the momentary silence, and other little details (almost imperceptible ones) converge in Isabel's mind to produce an "impression":

There was nothing to shock in this; they were old friends in fact. But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. But it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it. (James 1908, 165)

The connection (not yet revealed in the novel) between both elements, that is, on the one hand, the image of Osmond and madame Merle together, and, on the other hand, Osmond's petition to Isabel in the context of their failed marriage, has occurred beyond the domain of judgments, reasons and decisions. Both elements enlighten each other in a way which is prior to the last revelation that the Countess Gemini (Osmond's sister) will offer to Isabel at the end of the novel: that Pansy is the secret daughter of madame Merle (from the period when she was the lover of Osmond) and how madame Merle's maneuvers and Osmond's falling in love (vitiating so much by his selfishness) have ended up using Isabel's love and marriage. Osmond's petition (being pushed by madame Merle) means at the same time a new using of Isabel's marriage and the corroboration of using Isabel from the beginning.

Nevertheless, Isabel's image of Osmond and Merle being together does not become an epiphany (let us remember the last citation: "it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it"). Isabel does not reach a clear and complete seeing of all under a new light. We cannot speak at all of a dawning of an aspect (at that moment at least). Even though, the possibilities are there to the extent that the text reports Isabel's attention to subtle details (their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, the momentary silence...). Those details are, one by one, insignificant, unable to produce a remarkable impression in Isabel's mind, but all together they turn out to produce that impression. Furthermore, Isabel does not elaborate a hypothesis with all those details and the resulting impression, but rather opens a field for a possible hypothesis and may colour events and behaviours. The new field is the selfish attitude of Osmond's and madame Merle's behaviour. The hypothesis will be the definitively selfishly-motivated interpretation of Osmond and madame Merle moves, but it will happen later in the novel. Even better, we can say that the impression of strangely close familiarity between Osmond and Merle does not change (for the moment) the aspect of the facts, but opens up the possibility of possibilities insomuch as Osmond-Merle's relationship may reveal the selfishness of both, or the selfishness of both may confirm that the impression of intimate familiarity was not a pure chance or Isabel's momentary obsession.

Let us finish in the third level of the novel, that is the level of the

aesthetic experience of the reader. This person needs to activate her imagination in order to respond to the literary device beyond the dangers of *hypothesisism* and *epiphanism*.

Readers' imagination has an obvious role to play concerning the end of the story, and thus the consequences of Isabel's last reactions. We know (after Henrietta, Isabel's friend) that Isabel will return to Rome. Maybe in order to meet Osmond again? What attitude would she adopt towards him? Submissive? Rebellious? Autonomous? Or maybe she will come just to care for Pansy... James has dropped some incomplete clues along the novel supporting all those possibilities. In fact, if we think of *The Portrait of a Lady* in terms of a narrative device based on the idea of the open destiny of a young lady, the reader's experience consists of accompanying the main character in the play of possibilities that will appear in succession, concluding in the discovery (with Isabel) that the chosen possibility has not proven to be what it looked like.

What is amazing in James's literary style is that the novel (and *The Portrait of a Lady* paradigmatically) is a "weave over" in which a complex play of knowing warp is woven, including reader's knowledge about facts and characters. And what makes the story interesting (unlike a thriller) is not the yearning to discover the secret and crucial datum, but rather the literary-(hyphen)moral journey that the reader has to go through with the main character and the rest of the characters. On this journey the omniscient narrator may be up against the skin of a character, without eventually

dismissing the emergence of the narrator talking directly to the reader.

I will try to illustrate that active role with the actual final part of the novel. The ending of the novel narrates the last visit to Isabel of her eternal suitor Caspar Goodwood, the stolen (and flashing) kiss from Isabel, Isabel's escape, and Goodwood's last inquiry visiting Henrietta Stackpole, Isabel's friend. Three kinds of characters meet there.

Goodwood, Isabel's eternal suitor, is someone incapable of seeing a new aspect; his characteristic feature never changes and insists on his attitude throughout all the novel. Isabel has been able to see something new from a new aspect now ("She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path.", James 1908, 436), but where that path leads up to is an eternal and open work for the imagination of the readers of *The Portrait of a Lady*. And finally, Henrietta melts with the narrator (the last melting of the narrator, James's favourite weapon) building a last micro-device of aspect. I reproduce the last ten lines of the novel:

Again Miss Stackpole held him--with an intention of perfect kindness--in suspense. "She came here yesterday, and spent the night. But this morning she started for Rome."

Caspar Goodwood was not looking at her; his eyes were fastened on the doorstep. "Oh, she started--?" he stammered. And without finishing his phrase or looking up he stiffly averted himself. But he couldn't otherwise move.

Henrietta had come out, closing the door behind her, and now she put

out her hand and grasped his arm. "Look here, Mr. Goodwood," she said; "just you wait!"

On which he looked up at her--but only to guess, from her face, with a revulsion, that she simply meant he was young. She stood shining at him with that cheap comfort, and it added, on the spot, thirty years to his life. She walked him away with her, however, as if she had given him now the key to patience. (James 1908, 438-439)

Then, Henrietta blurts out to Goodwood a "just you wait!" which constitutes a curious last *aspectist* turn of the screw. Waiting for what? For Isabel's love? Not at all. The narrator takes the command in the last paragraph in order to reveal the intention of Henrietta and Goodwood's interpretative reaction. But James is not content with the omniscient power of the narrator to solve it: he looks for the support of visual intersubjective details. Goodwood discovers in Henrietta's face the cruel meaning of her "just you wait!" (that is: you are young, no hope regarding Isabel now). Is this a hidden and inner idea inside Henrietta's mind, being simply revealed by the omniscient narrator? Not at all. She intends for Goodwood to be perfectly able to grasp the deeper meaning of her "just you wait!" (and in fact, Goodwood does it). Henrietta "stood shining at him" and, besides that visual complement, the reader is perfectly authorized by the narrator to think that Henrietta obtains an intimate and somehow insane (cruel) satisfaction from her "cheap comfort". The hyperbolic description of the effect of the meaning in Goodwood's look is "it added, on the spot, thirty years to his

life”. Here James prompts the visual imagination of the reader, doing his bit especially well. Next, a new visual suggestion: “She walked him away with her, however”. There is a “and life goes on as usual” implied message. But just to finish, James puts in the narrator’s voice an “as if” which maybe is devoted to confirm the ironic rating of Henrietta’s attitude: “as if she had given him now the key to patience”. Does James really believe in the existence of that “key to patience”? Maybe we need a wider look at James’s work for an answer. Is that “key” maybe the key of the new aspect, the new *seeing* gained by the impatient Isabel in her new “very straight path”? Those and more questions remain open for the readers.

Of course, after all I am just offering my own particular *aspectist* interpretation of *The Portrait of a Lady* and persuading you to imagine James’s literary mastery that way.

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