

Misanthropy of Form: John Banville's Henry James

Misanthropia da Forma: Henry James de John Banville

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Abstract: *Mrs Osmond (2017) is unique to date among John Banville's non-pseudonymous novels in having a female protagonist and no first-person voice. Reviewers have hailed it as a pastiche faithful to the style and dramatic situation of the classic work for which it offers a sequel, Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady (1881). This essay argues that Mrs Osmond dismantles all the central elements of Portrait. Its manner of doing so shows the fundamental importance of a quality often observed in Banville's male narrators—misanthropy—to the design of his novels, particularly its close connection to the aspect of his work most highlighted by scholars: metafictional self-reflexivity.*

Keywords: *John Banville; Mrs Osmond; Henry James; The Portrait of a Lady; misanthropy; metafiction; the Bildungsroman.*

Resumo: *Mrs. Osmond (2017) é o único entre os romances não pseudonímicos de John Banville a ter uma protagonista feminina e nenhuma voz em primeira pessoa. Os críticos o saudaram como um pastiche fiel ao estilo e à situação dramática da obra clássica The Portrait of A Lady (1881), de Henry James, para a qual oferece uma sequência. Este ensaio argumenta que Mrs. Osmond desmonta todos os elementos centrais de Portrait. Sua maneira de fazer isso mostra a importância fundamental de uma qualidade frequentemente observada nos narradores masculinos de Banville para a construção de seus romances – a misantropia – e particularmente sua estreita conexão com o aspecto mais destacado de sua obra pelos estudiosos: a auto reflexividade metaficcional.*

Palavras-chave: *John Banville; Mrs. Osmond; Henry James; The Portrait of A Lady; misantropia; metaficção; Bildungsroman.*

The reception of John Banville's work has been pervaded by a preoccupation with misanthropy. Michael Springer (2019) notes "the tinge of misanthropy and self-loathing that marks out so many of his narrators (135). Focusing on one in particular, Jessica Winter (2003) argues that Axel Vander is "caged less by his 'dead leg' and 'sightless eye' than by his own corrosive misanthropy." Citing another, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan (2018) acknowledges Max Morden's "general misanthropy" (45). Introducing a scale of comparison, Mark O'Connell (2013) deems the "narcissism" of Gabriel Godkin and Gabriel Swan "less aggressively misanthropic" than that of Alexander Cleave, Vander, or Freddie Montgomery (86).

Misanthropy is so characteristic a feature of Banville's work that it has come to be associated with the author himself. Rob Doyle (2016) makes the identification: "the narrators of John Banville's novels tend towards misanthropy, solipsism, and the same patrician hauteur he affects in his public persona." One reviewer even worried that the tendency had wrought a debilitating effect, noting "quiet signs of creative weariness, if not of a creeping misanthropy" (Foram 2010). Banville's pseudonymous works do not escape the affliction, though it is partly

attributed to a literary forbear: “[Benjamin] Black takes up the misanthropic attitude of Chandler’s Marlowe” (Eisenberg 2017. 21). Interpretations that do not diagnose the ailment nevertheless register its impact. Seamus Deane (1976) once criticized the “introversion” that produces Banville’s world of “proverbial and archetypal corruption”(334). More recently, Neil Murphy (2018) pointed out the saturation of that world with crime, injury and menace (159).

Banvillean misanthropy has connections with another feature of his work often highlighted by critics: its interest in metafictional self-reflexivity. Scholars have long recognized the “self-conscious” and “experimental” quality of his novels and their overt focus on the construction of fiction (McMinn 1991.1). Often, this direct allusion to artifice finds a parallel in the concerns of the protagonists. As Rüdiger Imhof (1989) has pointed out, Banville heroes from *Doctor Copernicus* to the elder Gabriel Swan show an obsession with “unifying systems, literary or scientific, of sublime beauty and order”(171). On occasion, this fixation on what Elke D’hoker (2004) has described as a “shaping mode of representation” is dangerous to other human beings, who are regarded as disposable or incidental material (220). Freddie Montgomery, Axel Vander, and Victor Maskell strew collateral damage in pursuit of personal fantasy. Inspired by historical scandals of deceptive self-invention—Malcolm MacArthur, Paul de Man, Anthony Blunt—these figures connect fictional fabrication to heedless inhumanity.

Like larger narrative arcs, the brushstrokes of metafiction in Banville’s novels follow a misanthropic bent. Gabriel Swan in *Mefisto* (1986) flaunts his lack of interest in crafting a fully seamless story: “I had come to tell her, let me see, to tell her—oh, what does it matter, I can’t think of anything” (33). Indifferent to the reader, and apparently careless of detail, he casts doubt on the value of his entire authorial effort: “all wrong though, surely, this geography, or do I mean topography? It doesn’t matter” (74). On the rare occasion when a Banville narrator diffuses only lightness, a certain detached, speculative toying with human frailty still carries the stamp of misanthropy. In *The Infinities* (2009), probably the most fantastic of Banville approximations between amorality and fictional impunity, the Greek god Hermes disposes of the destinies of the personnel, arranging positions, interactions, couplings, impregnation. Like Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* (1989), who considers mortals a mere blemish on the face of a world far too beautiful to be a suitable home for them (26-7), this godlike perspective views human affairs as an absurd, incongruous blip in a vast, mysterious, yet ordered universe.

The sense of festivity in the schemes of a Greek god initiated into the laws of nature collapse an opposition recurrent in Banville’s texts, between mathematical or scientific system and a realm linked to the “circus.” Stepping into this space begins a journey that involves shifts of identity, theatrical play, and apparitions from the unconscious. Gabriel Godkin in *Birchwood* (1973) and Gabriel Swan of *Mefisto* both venture there, beyond the reach of damaged and fractious families. Yet this new anarchic terrain turns out to repeat the aggravations of the abandoned world of childhood, which are now directed toward other victims. The Banville narrator’s obsession with “system” is just the reverse side of a fascination with sportive experiment. Both are symptoms of misanthropy, and derive from subjection to arbitrary interference, seeking release by transferring this irritant to others. Even Hermes has a father (“my old Dad”) more delinquent than himself.

The close link in Banville’s oeuvre between misanthropy and the license claimed by fiction is most clearly demonstrated by a text in which the typical misanthropic male narrator does not appear. *Mrs Osmond* (2017), alone among Banville’s literary works in having a female protagonist and no first-person voice, scans the horizon of metafictional possibility, proposing

a sequel to Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Stylistic imitation, historical reference, and updates for a contemporary sensibility are all part of its repertoire. But rather than representing a faithful succession to its source, as reviewers have claimed,¹ the pastiche offered by *Mrs Osmond* in fact shows the irresistible pull of misanthropy on Banvillean novelistic design. The sequel mocks and nullifies every aspect of Jamesian structure. A general darkening of the characters makes a nonsense of the betrayal at the heart of *Portrait*. A focus on materiality destroys that text's abstract, psychological force. Instead of having a male speaker recount the carelessly inadvertent victimization of his fellow creatures—as in Banville's other plots—the narrative multiplies minor physical afflictions for its female protagonist. In other words, the metafictional revision amounts to a misanthropic action of form, by which the elements of the original are dismantled. In its place appears a familiar Banville landscape, where predictable human pettiness plays out against the alienated backdrop of an alluring cosmos.

As readers of James know, *The Portrait of a Lady* contains a pattern common in some shape to all of his novels: the betrayal of the main character through a compact between a mentor and a love-object, involving a hidden intimacy between these two. Sometimes the hero is overwhelmed by the resulting conflict. Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) commits suicide, unable to reconcile formative influences with innate passions. The eponymous sculptor of *Roderick Hudson* (1875) blunders toward fatal accident, ignorant of his patron's stake in his amorous as well as his artistic affairs. With James's late phase, the protagonist's innocence becomes a weapon against conspirators. In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), the relationship between Merton Densher and Kate Croy is destroyed by the dead Milly Theale's bequest, which has been made in full knowledge of the impecunious lovers' plot. In *The Golden Bowl* (1904), Maggie Verver banishes the threat to her marriage posed by her friend—and stepmother—Charlotte Stant, by pretending not to recognize it. Isabel Archer's final position is more ambiguous. A sequel contradicts as much as it resolves this quality, since the frozenness of impasse is also a characteristic Jamesian conclusion.

Corrupted Characters

Mrs Osmond makes the central betrayal of *The Portrait of a Lady* impossible. It does so by means of a general misanthropic transformation of the original. This is evident first of all in a change to the protagonists. Elke D'hoker (2019) notes the instances of complete reversal. Pansy Osmond goes from angelic to callous (363). Beneficent Mr. Touchett is besmirched as an adulterer (252). In addition, as D'hoker observes, “most Jamesian characters have come down a notch or two in the scale of coldness and corruption” (75). The Countess Gemini feels a newfound “antipathy” toward her niece (216), and a much more qualified sympathy for Isabel (191). The meddling yet well-intentioned Henrietta Stackpole turns out to have harbored secret, self-interested motives (89). In James's original she was a forthright American patriot. In Banville's sequel she appears status-conscious, easily offended, hypocritical. Isabel herself, previously inscrutably dutiful, is now no longer above thoughts of revenge (161).

Attitudes taken by the characters toward one another have also markedly hardened. Henrietta reserves for Warburton's sisters “her strongest disapproval and disdain” (87). She also held Ralph Touchett “in such low regard” (97), a statement surprising given that she cared for him on the journey home during his last illness. “I *warned* you against a person I knew to be unworthy of you,” Mrs. Touchett reminds Isabel, adding the direct insult “not, frankly, that I considered you worthy of so very much” (256). Mr. Touchett, modest about his vast wealth,

now appears to have been contemptuous of the masses, regarding them as living not on money but “small change” (41). The very tone of the humor in *Mrs Osmond* is pettily nasty. Whereas James creates comedy out of transatlantic misunderstanding, Banville parades and mocks small-minded pretense. “I do not follow with any interest the doings of the aristocracy,” claims Henrietta, “stiffy” (86) while Isabel, equally superficial, “dearly wished” she could suppress a memory to the contrary—of Henrietta keeping a “sharp” and imitative eye on English country house table manners (118).

If its deformation of the Jamesian ensemble were not enough, *Mrs Osmond* adds new characters to extend the range of bad temper and venality. Isabel’s maid, “discreet, devoted, and active”(524), is replaced by the figure of Staines, whose “chief token and proof” of loyalty is “a permanently maintained state of vexedness” (4). Isabel visits a suffragist, Florence Janeway, for guidance, and must summon the word *Schadenfreude* to describe the response (58). The smiling journalist Myles Devenish, Janeway’s nephew, has designs on Isabel’s wealth just as Merle and Osmond did, ambitious to become established as a newspaper editor in America (376). Supplementary details embellish the litany of perfidy. In a glance at James’s family origins, Amy Osmond remembers from her New York schooldays a violently punitive teacher from “the County of Cavan” (218). Gilbert Osmond was the childhood torturer of his sister, squeezing her wrist in an apparent gesture of friendliness “until the bones and sinews inside it creaked” (189). Nature itself seems vindictive. The moon peers at Isabel “with a gloating smirk” (105). Behind modern spectacle lurk the horrors of history. In the Louvre, Isabel imagines the swarms of tourists as marauding pupils in a *grand lycée* who have, on the morning of a national insurrection, “murdered their monitors with happy enthusiasm” (150).

In this atmosphere, it is difficult, as D’hoker remarks, to distinguish any particular wickedness in Osmond and Madame Merle. This is why, she speculates, the novel adds a new crime to top the rest (76). Osmond is a murderer, having taken his first wife to a plague-infested region, knowing she would die (337). But the misdeeds—and the sourness—of the characters do not simply spread the canker of Banvillean misanthropy. Their effect is to destroy the structure at the heart of *The Portrait of a Lady*. The crimes of the miscreants are in fact figured by *Mrs Osmond* in two distinct ways. In Chapter XXV, Mrs. Touchett recounts an episode from her marriage, telling of an affair between her husband and the wife of a colleague, which produced a child who was left in an orphanage. The chapter begins with an adaptation of one of the most famous of all opening lines from the novel in English: “there is a universal truth which the young are all too infrequently surprised into acknowledging, and then with a sense of having been violently brought up short, which is that, as they are now, so too were the old, once” (251). Mrs. Touchett tells Isabel the story so that she will realize her situation is not so unusual. The framing of the chapter itself, with its conversion of the *Bildungsroman*’s journey of insight into the recognition of a common truth, seems to share this perspective.

However, the putative outrage at the core of *The Portrait of a Lady* is not adultery but conspiracy. In a classic violation of the categorical imperative, Isabel was turned into an object of use or “convenience” (547). Introducing the crime of murder on the one hand, and emphasizing the commonness of infidelity on the other, is a misanthropic adjustment which stresses the limitlessness and the banal frequency of treachery. The gravity of conspiracy, by contrast, depends on a moral differentiation between its perpetrators and everyone else, and most importantly, between the perpetrators and their victim, the main protagonist. Already demoted from the nobleness of the original, Banville’s Isabel is portrayed as being so

concerned with appearances that she is not even able to acknowledge what has happened to her. In *Portrait*, she admitted to the dying Ralph Touchett that she was married for her money. In *Mrs Osmond* she objects to Henrietta's vehement summary of the facts, "ow[ing] a duty to her husband not to hear him maligned and mocked for a scoundrel and a fortune-hunter—nay for a common embezzler!" (130). The archaic flourish "nay" (found nowhere in James's novel) renders her a priggish Victorian stereotype.

Dismantled Form

The nature of the misanthropic perspective that drives *Mrs Osmond* can be illuminated by the modifications to a pivotal sequence from the original. Banville has Isabel think of the years of her marriage as spent "crouched in the cramped confines of the little model dwelling she had so handily fashioned" (16). Her husband, she realizes, "had not been with her in that little house, but had been outside it all along, standing upright and at his leisure, with his hands in his pockets, and only leaning down to peep in at her amusedly now and then where she sat huddled with her arms circled about her knees and her head so sharply inclined she could see little more than the tips of her toes" (17). This image combines several elements to suggest that Isabel constructed the fiction of her marriage all by herself. Osmond's pose is the same as the one Isabel noticed when she saw him in casual conversation with Madame Merle and realized the nature of the relation between the pair. Here she is shown willfully severed from that reality. The image also invokes Ibsen's well-known association in *A Doll's House* (1879) between the infantilization of women and their confinement to a private, domestic sphere, depicting Isabel as having deliberately shrunk herself into the position of child. Most importantly, the trope refers to the rhetoric of dwelling and habitation from the famous Chapter XLII of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

In that decisive rumination, however, the implications of the metaphor are very different. Isabel imagines her relationship with her husband as a terrifying journey underground. After a year "she had suddenly found the infinite vista of multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley, with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness...it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression..." (405-6). As she clamors through this subterranean region, "it was as if Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one" (406). Although we are in Isabel's mind, or affiliated to it by Jamesian "point of view," the roles of both parties in the degeneration of the marriage are traversed. The causes lie in Isabel's willed and unconscious self-limitation, and in her own and Osmond's desire to convert each other into objects of acquisition. Burdened by her vast wealth, she bestowed it on what she thought was a worthy recipient, and to win his approval made herself "lesser" in his company. In return, James suggests, she expected to gain masculinity itself, in rarefied form, as a possession: "the finest—in the sense of being the subtlest—manly organism she had ever known had become her property" (408). Osmond, for his part, wants to convert Isabel into a collector's item. Believing she has "too many ideas," he would have liked her to have "nothing of her own but her pretty appearance" (409).

The journey beneath the earth ends with arrival at "the mansion of [Osmond's] own habitation." In this mental space, Isabel feels "incredulous terror": "between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (410). Whereas previously Osmond had seemed retiring, independent-minded, and of excellent taste despite his meager

resources, he now appears to care deeply about the world's opinion. Affecting a "sovereign contempt for every one but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied" (410), he combines esteem for the rituals of aristocratic society with tolerance of its sexual mores. Isabel is at first shocked—"Did all women have lovers? Did they all lie and even the best have their price?"—and then disdainful, earning Osmond's hatred, which becomes "the occupation and comfort of [his] life" (413). In Chapter XXVII of *Mrs Osmond*, Banville revises the second part of James's long metaphor. Here, confinement in the "mansion" of Osmond's superficial mind changes into a visit, *before* the marriage takes place, to a "cloacal den" at the back of his villa. Osmond's attitude to society is presented in both literal and metaphorical terms as a "malignant satisfaction in turning up the world's stone so as to expose to the light of day the foul things swarming and squirming underneath it" (272). In *The Portrait of a Lady*, by contrast, the reptile from which Isabel recoils is Osmond's own "egotism," which "lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers" (410).

As Franco Moretti (1987) has shown, the *Bildungsroman* "seems to justify itself as a form in so far as it duplicates the proceedings of a trial"—a trial in which we can expect to see "the false testimonies of the villain and the sincere confessions of the hero; the cult of innocence and the all-pervasive opposition of 'right' and wrong" (212). Although more complex, James's novel nevertheless remains predicated on this paradigm. *Mrs Osmond*, however, rejects the very oppositions that the "trial" upholds. Depicting Isabel as a child who has by her own contriving shut out the facts of her circumstances, it suggests that the innocence of the "hero" is a willful infantile delusion. The change to the timeline of the visit to Osmond's "mansion" implies that no deception has been practiced. So too does the image of the upturned stone. Instead of a shallow obsession with the world's opinion of him, the action of uncovering swarming insects foregrounds Osmond's opinion of the world, and gives his disclosure of it to his wife a natural rather than a social dimension. Gone is the impression created by *Portrait*, of a coldly dissimulated hypocrisy of personality. An emphasis on revolting earthiness is quintessentially misanthropic, and its invocation of nature asserts the legitimacy of that disposition. The idea of a reprehensible betrayal of innocence is therefore no longer in play. The explicitly sexual and scatological connotations of the "cloacal den" challenge the elusiveness of the body and sexuality in James. Did Isabel's desire, or, as Rebecca West (1916) once argued, the deplorable absence of it, not lead her to self-deception?² But the main function of the overtone here is to substitute initiation for development, and degrade psychical horror to the level of disgust.

Just as it obliterates the betrayal central to *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Mrs Osmond* dismantles the typical Jamesian dénouement. Banville's heroine responds to her entrapment with a device similar to that of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. Like Milly, she parries the conspiracy against her through a lavish act of giving, bestowing her marital home on Madame Merle. Her aim, however, brings out the retaliatory element in the wronged hero's munificence. Milly's bequest means that Kate Croy and Merton Densher must always regret their scheme. Isabel wants to ensure that Osmond is daily confronted with the scandals of his past. As well as emphasizing its avenging effect, Banville's "quotation" of this gift motif punctures its dramatic power. Mrs. Touchett thinks Isabel's plan confused and naïve (257). When it is announced to Osmond and Merle, we see a flat, frozen tableau and a slide into anticlimactic irrelevance: "the two were staring at each other, eye to eye—a *quattr'occhi*, as the Italians say, Isabel recalled with surpassing inconsequence—and in their looks were mingled so many meanings, emotions and calculations that it would be foolhardy to attempt to enumerate them here." (352).

The moral force of the gambit also drains away. As Isabel is making her statement, she is “like a child in the classroom who has been summoned to her feet by the teacher and commanded to recite a lesson she had spent all of the previous evening striving, with much worry and effort, to learn off by heart” (350-1). This comparison appears at two other points. The restaurant of the London hotel where Isabel goes after leaving Gardencourt reminds her of a “schoolroom,” where, despite the waiter’s “soft obsequiousness of manner,” she feels “screwed down into her chair, like a cork forced into the neck of a bottle”(18). The space contains a figure answering to the description of Henry James himself, whom Isabel imagines—in a nod to a disastrous phase in James’s career—to be some kind of “man of the theatre, perhaps, an actor-manager, or even a playwright?” (19). In a subsequent scene, when Henrietta is chiding Isabel about her forfeited potential, she remarks that she and Ralph Touchett had previously regarded Isabel as parents do “when their child is independently brilliant in front of a class of worthy dullards” (101).

These images again imply—contrary to the usual impetus of the *Bildungsroman*—a lack of growth and development, indeed a retrogression. Isabel is a child before her marriage and after: a star, then a reluctant, and finally a diligent but struggling pupil. Construing her gambit as “rote-learned” is typical of the intertextual world of metafiction, in which the singular power of a dramatic conclusion becomes a stock device from a well-known bag of authorial tricks—or here, from the playscript of James the theater man. It has a further, more hostile meaning. Banville’s frame of schoolroom memorization for the notion of pursuing retribution through the grand gesture ridicules this as a childish fantasy, perhaps one inspired by early humiliations. Amy Osmond’s recollection of a Cavan schoolteacher could also be pertinent here. With the “coals of fire” element in the justice it imagines, James’s trope may be less a literary invention than a doctrine indelibly imbibed from his Ulster Presbyterian roots.

Corporeal Ideals

Mrs Osmond introduces a number of signs that it will follow preoccupations typical of Banville’s other novels. His familiar opposition between mathematical system and the circus appears in miniature during Isabel’s train journey to London. She thinks of her dilemma as “a hard task to solve, like an exercise in geometry or algebra” (5). The potential seen in her by Ralph Touchett and others becomes a performance of “spangled-swoopings, to and fro in the powdery light, high up, oh, so high up, under the big, the tremendous, top” (5). When Isabel and Henrietta are talking in the garden about why Amy Osmond revealed the truth about Osmond and Merle (out of “boredom,” Isabel speculates, repeating a hypothesis from *Portrait*), the narrator imagines a “faun” in the undergrowth who is “bored” by the “somewhat aimless animadversions” of the conversation (128). This aside betrays the attitude of an author uninterested in psychological motive, and keener on the surrealistic flights of some of his more dream-like narratives.

Rather than featuring a misanthropic male narrator, who, harassed as a child, distresses others, *Mrs Osmond* instead depicts its heroine as a child or infant animal vacillating between constraint and release. Her withdrawal of money from the bank is like the little “gambol” of a lamb who had been “caught up in a hedge of thorns” (31) Returning from the awkward company of Florence Janeway to her hotel, she feels “like a child given the run of a delightfully deserted house”(67). The smiles and friendliness of the journalist Myles Devenish make her realize that she had been “like a child hiding in a cupboard from a capriciously cruel parent” (309). The most striking image of Isabel’s constraint incorporates an element of wild

unleashing. It revises James's evocation of his heroine's "idea of happiness": "a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see" (157). In *Mrs Osmond*, "the creature she imagined in that coach now was not herself, but a captive child, baffled and frightened and in dread of whatever destruction lay ahead, while up on the driving seat, in the darkness of the rushing night, a wordless fiend rattled the reins and mercilessly plied the whip" (47).

Instead of the male misanthrope precipitating the injury and death of a female character (a motif in several Banville novels), we see the narrative itself harry and afflict its woman protagonist. Isabel's first appearance more closely resembles the young and oppressed governess depicted in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) than the disillusioned heroine at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*. The beginning of *Mrs Osmond*—"it had been a day of agitations and alarms" (3)—already echoes the governess's first words about her long-ago experience: "I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops" (6). The governess continues to conflate psychological with physical oscillation: "in this state of mind I spent the long hours of bumping, swinging coach." Banville's borrowing converts this into a bodily invasion: "the awful rhythm of the train's wheels, beating on and on within her" (3). This is the first of a random series of proddings, jabbings, attacks. In Paris, "a splinter of early sunlight entered at a gap in the curtains and struck her eyes and made her open them" (146). In Florence, on the way to an *osteria* with Mrs. Touchett, she feels "at a point in her brow mid-way between her eyes" a pain "as sharp as if she were being pierced by the point of a needle" (240). Isabel is also enveloped by threatening, animated, savage spaces: the train is "a great snorting, smoking brute" (3); the bank "seemed to look down upon the sunlit street with its nostrils flared in pained reprehension and disdain" (24).

Bethany Layne (2018) has observed that Banville creates a more corporeal Isabel. Her motherhood is no longer mere proof of marital consummation, and the power play imposed by Osmond has acquired a sexual dimension (2). But the physicality of *Mrs Osmond* is part of a misanthropic attachment to the earthly material. It shifts away from and negates psychology, and thereby also the abstract values of *The Portrait of a Lady*, especially a certain vitality of spirit and intellect associated with its heroine. In *Mrs Osmond*, Isabel is forgetful and mindless. She mislays the sum of money withdrawn from the bank, leaving it by mistake at Janeway's and only retroactively (for reasons not explained) converting it into a donation to "the cause." In Italy, she forgets that her husband is in Florence, despite having been told so by Mrs. Touchett, and despite the fact that a confrontation with him is her main goal (240). Banville's Isabel has no talent for holding her ground in such encounters. "I fail to see the logic of it" Madame Merle aptly responds when Isabel blurts out that she rather than Merle ought to quit the scene of their chance encounter in Paris (174). As well as forming a thoughtless heroine, the narrative focus on the corporeal brings with it a conventional kind of misogyny. Isabel's hoped-for confidante, the feminist activist Janeway, is an infirm "spinster" whose hospitality, commensurate with her convictions, inflicts a minor ordeal. In an affirmation of the reproductive basis of desire, she promotes the prospects of her young nephew, but is ultimately skeptical and jealous of Isabel. If the malice of these details is doubted, it can be confirmed by the invocation of the real name of one of the greatest of Victorian writers, Mary Ann/e Evans (George Eliot), to designate the supervisor of the printing of banners for Janeway's rallies (56).

The materiality of *Mrs Osmond* is in part a critique of a coyness about money in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and in the nineteenth-century novel in general. It foregrounds the entire infrastructure—travel, food, servants, and cash—that makes psychological rumination and

struggle possible. Indeed, the material base of *Portrait*, as *Mrs Osmond* demonstrates, would be the ruin of its superstructure of lies and delusion. Servants know—and could at any time communicate—everything. At the same time, this reminder carries an overtone of nastiness, a sense of snide exposé. The juxtaposition of Isabel’s predicament with the plight of a weeping beggar in Chapter I (9), has both these implications: of critique, and subtle undermining of the already-established Jamesian dramatic scenario. The repeated setting of the action in the restaurants of popular European city-destinations drops a sly hint that the enjoyments of a novel like *The Portrait of a Lady* (for both writer and reader) partly derive from the vicarious experience of mild exoticism and luxury. Further, they imply that James’s great cultural themes are based in something no more exalted than tourism. Corporeality has the effect of degrading the characters into objects of an amusement generated by their fleshly weakness—as when Mrs. Touchett mops up the sauce on her plate, instructing Isabel in the proper Italian word for the proceeding (254).

If *The Portrait of a Lady* was, despite the financial motor of its plot, coy about money, it is also vague on the choices open to Isabel. These fall somewhere between Caspar Goodwood’s outburst—“a woman deliberately made to suffer is justified in anything in life—in going down into the streets if that will help her!” (563)—and Mr. Touchett’s reassurance to Isabel that she will have “great success” (54), by which he probably means marriage, an assumption of which she does not seem aware. *Mrs Osmond* adds the apparatus of bankers, lawyers, legal documents, divorce, but these concrete resources only bring the Jamesian arrangements to an end. Isabel resolves to take on the task of nursing Janeway through her last illness, a decision that completes the identification between the cause of women’s suffrage and the body of the spinster (374). She brings Myles Devenish to see the spot where she failed to give the beggar money (375), which is not a resolution in a favor of philanthropy, but the conversion of what might have been an actual deed into an abstraction, and so the mere negative of the novel’s emphasis on materiality. When Isabel says “nothing, nothing at all” (376) to Devenish’s proposal, this can be read as a sign that she has learned from previous attempts to exploit her. It also, however, fittingly represents the novel’s action upon James’s *Portrait*; its dismantling of all of its elements, leaving no remainder.

Notes

- 1 Michael Wood (2018) claims that Banville “scrupulously reviews (and revives) the situation in the other novel.” Edmund White (2017) argues that Banville follows James’s pacing and his combination of vagueness with vivid metaphor.
- 2 There could be nothing “less delicate,” West remarks of Isabel’s purportedly noble character, than “to marry a person for any reason but the consciousness of passion” (70).

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