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Freedom, Self-Obligation, and Selfhood in Henry James

PATRICK FESSENBECKER

PERHAPS the most vexing question to ask about Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880–81, revised 1908) is also the most obvious: when we think of the eponymous Isabel Archer, it is difficult not to be struck by Dorothy Berkson's simple but appropriate query, "Why does she marry Osmond?"¹ And, of course, why does she stay with him at the novel's end, when all hope of marital happiness has faded? In answering these questions, many critics have attempted to argue that Isabel is fundamentally mistaken in her actions, or that she is forced into her decision. I ultimately think that both of these ways of answering the question are misguided. Isabel does not make an error in practical reasoning, nor is she compelled by external forces to do as she does. Rather, while there is a constraint of sorts on her, I hope to show that it is an interesting kind of self-constraint. Moreover, once we begin to think about Isabel in this way, a new way of understanding the Jamesian depiction of selfhood throughout

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¹ See Berkson, "Why Does She Marry Osmond? The Education of Isabel Archer," *American Transcendental Quarterly*, no. 60 (1986), 68–69.

several of his novels will begin to come into focus, and a new dimension of James's analysis of subjectivity will appear.

Let us begin by briefly considering some of the critical reactions to *The Portrait of a Lady*. There are, I think, three fundamentally different attitudes one can take toward Isabel's actions. The first, exemplified by Nina Baym's essay "Revision and Thematic Change in *The Portrait of A Lady*," contends that Isabel makes a mistake in acting as she does; to put the point more precisely, Isabel's actions are neither explainable from the third-person perspective as the necessary outcome of some convergence of forces, nor are they justifiable from the first-person perspective as the most reasonable and "best" thing to do. Baym emphasizes characters like Henrietta Stackpole and Mrs. Touchett, who manage to live lives of independence and freedom, either outside of marriage or within it. Thus, when Caspar Goodwood offers to "rescue" Isabel at the end of novel, Baym stresses the fact that "Isabel's alternatives are not at all subsumed in the choice between him and Osmond. She has still the alternative of going her own way."² And, although there are some external constraints on Isabel's final actions, ultimately "the obstacles are internal, in Isabel's inadequate preparation for and understanding of the life she thinks she has chosen" ("Revision and Thematic Change," p. 199). This is to say that the reasons why Isabel chooses to stay with Osmond are fundamentally bad ones, and that through characters like Henrietta, James stresses the inadequacy of Isabel's thinking about her marriage.³

Though I share the irritated reaction at the end of the novel that probably motivates many of the readings that fall into this first category, the fact that Isabel's decision comes after a series of enlightenments, and thus with a full understanding of the situation, suggests that her decision to return to Osmond is not in any straightforward sense a "mistake." Undoubtedly

² Nina Baym, "Revision and Thematic Change in *The Portrait of a Lady*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22 (1976), 199.

³ I would also include in this category Leon Edel's reading (see Edel, *Henry James: The Conquest of London, 1870-1884* [New York: J. B. Lippincott Co, 1962], pp. 417-34); and Tony Tanner's interpretation (see Tanner, "The Fearful Self: Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*," *Critical Quarterly*, 7 [1964], 205-19).

Henrietta Stackpole and Mrs. Touchett do demonstrate ways of living independently while married, but it seems crucial to me that Isabel makes her decision from a position of full understanding, and, while her actions may be tragic, they do not strike me as foolish: she is doing, in some sense, what she has to do.

The second broad attitude detectable in *Portrait* criticism follows this sort of intuition and contends that while Isabel's actions are not justifiable, they are at least explainable.⁴ This way of understanding the novel theorizes some set of constraints that operate on the characters in the story, and then argues that those constraints ultimately force Isabel to act as she does.⁵ Berkson's own analysis falls into this category; for her it is the sexual constraints of nineteenth-century society in general and the *Bildungsroman* in particular that force Isabel first into her marriage and then into her return to it. Thus, she concludes, "Henry James takes us beyond the traditional ending, marriage, and shows us the tragedy that can face a young woman whose culture provides her with no serious alternative to marriage and which expects her to marry before she has experienced life and gained the wisdom necessary for judgment" ("Why Does She Marry Osmond?" pp. 68–69). This category, then, implicitly rejects the premise (sometimes unspoken) of the arguments of the first category, which claimed that Isabel could have acted differently than she does in fact act.⁶

⁴ I should acknowledge at this point that Baym's reading is too sophisticated to fall cleanly into the first category; her discussion of the evolution of Isabel's ideas about freedom and the mistakes they lead her to make suggest that another reading of Baym might place her analysis in the second category I have identified.

⁵ I would also include in this category the following readings: Carole Vopat, "Becoming a Lady: The Origins and Development of Isabel Archer's Ideal Self," *Literature and Psychology*, 38, nos. 1–2 (1992), 38–56; Richard Poirier, *The Comic Sense in Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960); and Laurence Bedwell Holland, "The Marriage," in his *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 28–42.

⁶ Though I do not have space to follow it up here, there would be discernible subgroups in this second category. One could establish a taxonomy based on which type of constraint the particular critic felt most important, whether it was psychological, social, or aesthetic, and on whether the constraint operates on Isabel or James; in other words, whether James is depicting the constraint or subject to it. Berkson's own analysis straddles this distinction by conflating the social constraint of gender norms in society—which presumably operates on Isabel—and the aesthetic constraint of the form of the *Bildungsroman*—which presumably operates on James.

While I agree that something obliges Isabel to act as she does, this obligation does not seem to me to arise from the social world around her, the aesthetic form of the story she is in, the unconscious self that underlies her understanding, or whatever other force one might cite. Certainly, I do not doubt that many nineteenth-century women were either overtly or more insidiously compelled to act in certain ways, but this does not seem to be James's interest in Isabel.⁷ Indeed, James's epiphanic description of Isabel's realization that she has been manipulated into her marriage clearly depicts Isabel's assumption of a certain kind of control over the forces that had been determining her actions, especially once she perceives Madame Merle's secret.

Thus, I am personally inclined toward the third and final category, which contends that Isabel's actions are not simply explainable but are in fact justifiable.⁸ Carrying out this sort of interpretation relies upon the creation of a theoretical frame, which establishes an account of what it is to act rationally and

⁷ It seems to me that James's discussion of Isabel in the preface reads this way. The question that James asks in the 1908 preface to the New York Edition—"what will she do?" (Henry James, "Preface to the New York Edition" [1908], in his *The Portrait of a Lady: An Authoritative Text, Henry James and the Novel, Reviews and Criticism*, second edition, ed. Robert D. Bamberg [New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995], p. 12)—surely is only interesting if she is in fact doing something—in other words, if her actions are in some sense self-controlled. Further references to *The Portrait of a Lady* are from this edition and appear in the text.

⁸ It is worth mentioning that there would a fourth category of interpretations, which understand Isabel's actions as in some sense lacking an explanation. Among recent work, J. Hillis Miller's chapter "The Story of a Kiss: Isabel's Decisions in *The Portrait of a Lady*," in his *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 30–83, is an exemplary instance of this sort of argument. Miller argues that the novel offers support for several contradictory explanations of Isabel's actions, and no way to decide between them: as he puts it, "I mean that the text is overdetermined. It offers several determinable explanations that are incompatible" (*Literature as Conduct*, p. 75). In particular, he works through four different explanations as to why promises might matter so much to Isabel (see pp. 77–79), which range from a claim to integrity to a claim that Isabel is a masochist and James is a sadist. Rather than being a weakness of the novel, however, for Miller it demonstrates Jacques Derrida's contention that "the moment of decision itself is unknowable" (*Literature as Conduct*, p. 80). Though a full treatment of Miller's argument would take too much space, let me note by way of motivating my own argument that Miller thinks his argument goes further than it does. It may be true that the novel offers several determinable explanations, but it is not clear, without further argument, that they are incompatible. It might be, for instance, that James is a sadist, but that the sadism manifests itself in the fact that the only way for Isabel to maintain integrity is to return to her husband.

then argues that Isabel's actions fit the account. Thus, the argument hinges upon what sort of theoretical frame best fits the events of the novel. I want briefly to consider two important analyses in this category—Paul B. Armstrong's account in his *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (1983) and Sigi Jöttkandt's account in her *Acting Beautifully: Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic* (2005)—and then go on to offer my own.

For Armstrong there are three stages to Isabel's development as an agent, corresponding to William James's analysis of the "healthy minded" and the "sick soul," and the "once-born" and "twice-born." Armstrong introduces this analysis by briefly summarizing it:

At first, with the buoyant healthy-mindedness of the once-born, Isabel regards her possibilities as limitless and relishes an almost giddy sense of her freedom and power. Then, trapped by circumstances she has helped to create in a misguided attempt to ground her freedom in a meaningful situation, she learns the horrible reality of bondage and necessity as she undergoes the trials of guilt and despair. Ultimately, though, she seems to break through to the integrity of the twice-born in the liberating act of acknowledging her limits freely, fully, and resolutely.⁹

Armstrong goes on to develop an account of each of these stages by supplementing William James's terms with concepts from the tradition of Continental philosophy: thus, in explaining Isabel's first stage he notes Søren Kierkegaard's discussion of the expansiveness of freedom, and in explaining the "horrible reality" of the second stage he relies upon Sartrean "bad faith."

Armstrong explains: "In terms of her self-deception about freedom and limitation, . . . the mistake that binds [Isabel] so desperately is her attempt to defy limits in the guise of accepting them by marrying Osmond in the hope of discovering perfect freedom" (*Phenomenology of Henry James*, p. 120). The argument here is that Osmond, in Isabel's imagination, represents a non-servile form of independence that would satisfy the cravings for freedom that motivated her first stage. In his cultivated

⁹ Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. 103.

aesthetic asceticism, Armstrong argues, Osmond presents an “independence” from the world that Isabel finds “intriguing” (p. 115).

Of course, as the plot soon reveals, Osmond is not the aesthete he appears to be, but instead he is a cruel and worldly manipulator. Isabel’s recognition of this fact, however, is crucial: for Armstrong this recognition “marks the moment when she moves from bondage toward a better grounded freedom by taking up a new attitude toward her situation and confronting it critically and self-critically as never before” (*Phenomenology of Henry James*, p. 124). This new attitude, by enabling a different relationship to her past, allows Isabel a correspondingly different relationship to her current self: “Threatened by despair, [Isabel] has achieved instead that sense of integrity that comes from accepting the irreversibility of what has been in one’s own history. . . . Neither defiant nor submissive, Isabel has emerged, then, from healthy-minded naiveté and the depression of a sick soul into the integrity of the twice-born” (p. 131). This is to say, I think, that Isabel’s recognition of Osmond’s and Merle’s manipulations enable her to be honest about the causes of her actions in a way that she could not be before; moreover, once she is fully aware of these causes, her decision nevertheless to return to Osmond represents a kind of “integrity,” since she is being true to the person she has become.

Similarly, for Sigi Jöttkandt, embracing her marriage is the only way for Isabel to live up to the value of freedom that she has endorsed for the entire novel, albeit in different forms. Isabel, in this account, begins the novel believing that freedom consists of avoiding all obligations and impediments to choice, a state that Jöttkandt describes as “the state of possibility”; this, however, is “a negative rather than positive concept of freedom, understood as an absence of limitation.”¹⁰ Isabel becomes dissatisfied with this state and looks for a different kind of freedom

¹⁰ Sigi Jöttkandt, *Acting Beautifully: Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic* (Buffalo: State Univ. of New York Press, 2005), p. 15. (I am indebted to Jöttkandt for directing me to Berkson’s essay.) For other interpretations in this category, see Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), and Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).

in a marriage to Osmond; for Jöttkandt, following Kant, this is because “freedom without boundaries . . . is no freedom at all but rather a wearisome slavery to her immediate whims. By marrying Osmond, Isabel imagines she will expand rather than contract her freedom—duty will give her a vehicle through which to articulate her freedom” (*Acting Beautifully*, p. 16).

Crucially, it turns out, Jöttkandt’s Osmond links freedom and duty incorrectly. Osmond’s duties are fundamentally “aesthetic”; he retains his independence by embracing social conventions and the language of manners, but “such an aesthetic solution” to the problem of the ideal of freedom versus the constraints of necessity “is accomplished only by disguising the violence through which this synthesis is ultimately forged” (*Acting Beautifully*, p. 19). Isabel’s decision at the end of the novel reveals her turn away from an “aesthetic” reconciliation of freedom and duty toward a Kantian, ethical one, where an agent freely chooses her determined status. Rather than mere social conventions, however, “Isabel acts out of duty toward the moral law itself, which for Kant is the only way through which our transcendental freedom can be realized” (*Acting Beautifully*, p. 28).¹¹

I have a good deal of sympathy for both Jöttkandt’s and Armstrong’s analyses. Aside from the general fact of their arguments that Isabel’s actions are justifiable, it seems right to think that Isabel begins the novel with a negative conception of freedom, or a kind of “once-born” “healthy-mindedness.” Despite their richness, however, these accounts strike me as problematic for a few reasons. To take Jöttkandt’s ideas first, we should

¹¹ This is not the place into enter an extended discussion of Kant’s view, though Henry E. Allison’s *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990) is excellent on this score. However, since some sense of what Kant is talking about seems germane, let me try to offer a (very rough) summary. Kant first notes that any action that responds to a desire is “heteronomous,” and therefore not autonomous, because it is a response to something that exists outside of myself. Moreover, it turns out, any action that I do because it is in my self-interest is also heteronomous, since my interests are purely results of the adventitious facts of my circumstances, and thus also not essentially myself. Thus, I am only autonomous when my actions occur as a result of the pure will—my will divorced from all the particulars of my identity. This, for Kant, is the moral law; ultimately, then, freedom exists only in determinism because it is only when my actions are the result of the moral law that I am autonomous.

note that because of her insistence that Isabel maintains her belief in the value of freedom, Jöttkandt is forced into a complicated picture wherein Isabel's actions are in fact the fullest expression of freedom she can have, a claim that seems more than a little dubious given the eventually oppressive nature of her marriage. Moreover, I am strongly inclined to think that Isabel does not see things this way; she seems to understand her marriage not as an extension of her freedom, but rather as a certain kind of alternative to the free life that she lived before meeting Osmond. Although to a certain extent I can only defend this point within a larger reading, I want to mention a passage that I will return to in greater depth later on. When Osmond first tells Isabel he is in love with her, she responds: "Don't say that." The narrator explains:

. . . she answered with an intensity that expressed the dread of having, in this case too, to choose and decide. What made her dread great was precisely the force which, as it would seem, ought to have banished all dread—the sense of something within herself, deep down, that she supposed to be inspired and trustful passion. It was there like a large sum stored in a bank—which there was a terror in having to begin to spend. If she touched it, it would all come out. (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 263)

When Isabel marries Osmond, this "inspired and trustful passion" does indeed come out, and Isabel dreads it precisely because it overwhelms her ability to choose. Thus, I cannot agree either that Isabel marries Osmond in order to increase her freedom or that she returns to him for the same reason; Isabel understands quite clearly that marriage represents a loss of independence.

Second, it seems to me that Jöttkandt is mistaken in contending that the source of the necessity for Isabel's return is an ethical one. To the extent that ethical obligations play a role in Isabel's deliberations, they consist entirely of her responsibility to aid Pansy, not in some sort of obligation to manifest the Kantian good will by freely choosing her determined state. Rather, if Isabel does feel an obligation to return to Rome (and I agree with Jöttkandt that she does), then the source of this feeling is her self—and I am inclined to read James as suggesting that the

obligations that one places on oneself are rather different than the obligations of morality.

As for Armstrong, he recognizes the feature of Isabel's agency that I am suggesting Jötkandt dismisses. In Armstrong's terms:

Isabel's "dread" is a fear of nothing but freedom itself—a fear, that is, of having "to choose and decide" how and where to commit herself to engagement with a situation. Her decision to travel was, in part, an attempt to escape Osmond's threat and its accompanying anguish. But when she returns, she marries him because she positively wants to consent to a limiting necessity, to bind herself to a situation. (*Phenomenology of Henry James*, p. 111)

Now this is an important insight: I am strongly inclined to agree with Armstrong that this is a crucial moment in Isabel's volitional life, though I am inclined toward a rather different philosophical frame to explain its nature. And to a certain extent, a defense of this frame—as opposed to Armstrong's—will only be possible after a fuller elaboration. Let me note at the moment, however, that the Heideggerian concepts that Armstrong relies on in explaining Isabel's final state bear an unclear relation to her previous volitional states. As I mentioned, Armstrong contends that Isabel's critical reaction to her state allows her a new kind of integrity; he explains this concept by noting Heidegger's discussion of Dasein and "there-ness."¹² In this account, only by acknowledging "the limitations and commitments involved in her relation with Osmond" can Isabel live a free life (*Phenomenology of Henry James*, p. 131). But surely these limitations and commitments only have relevance because of Isabel's relationship to them—which is to say, they are limitations only because she in some sense created them. And thus what matters is not precisely the "there-ness" of the situation, but rather Isabel's relationship to her self. Certainly, this is a bold and complicated claim, but I might simplify it by saying that I prefer Harry Frankfurt's analysis of freedom and selfhood as a philosophical background for a reading of James, rather than the Kantian notions in Jötkandt's interpretation or

¹² See Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, pp. 109, 131.

the Continental philosophy in Armstrong's reading. In order to work through this argument, let us thus turn to a more direct analysis of Frankfurt and *The Portrait of a Lady*.



As many critics have noted, at the beginning of *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer desires primarily to maintain her freedom at all costs: "If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of,' she went on with a slight recurrence of grandeur, 'it's my personal independence'" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 142). This desire leads her to decline marriage offers from both Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton; Isabel explains that accepting a marriage proposal would impinge on her ability to act freely, a notion clarified somewhat in the rejection of Lord Warburton's proposal as a "prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life" (p. 101). This notion of a "free exploration of life" and the desire to multiply various kinds of experiences is apparently key, for Isabel repeats it several times in explaining her refusal to marry; thus, again in conversation with Warburton, she remarks: "it comes over me every now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself. . . . From life" (p. 119). In other words, Isabel cannot be happy by privileging one experience over another: she believes she can only be happy through openness to all experiences.

Harry Frankfurt calls this kind of agent a "wanton." He describes the concept in his influential early essay "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person": "The essential characteristic of a wanton is that he does not care about his will. His desires move him to do certain things, without its being true of him either that he wants to be moved by those desires or that he prefers to be moved by other desires."¹³ For Frankfurt, here, to be free is to have one's first-order desires conform to one's second-order desires; in other words, free agents are

¹³ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person" (1971), rpt. in his *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 16.

those who want what they want to want. Though the wanton lacks desires of this sort, this does not imply the absence of rationality: “Nothing in the concept of a wanton implies that he cannot reason or that he cannot deliberate concerning how to do what he wants to do. What distinguishes the rational wanton from other rational agents is that he is not concerned with the desirability of his desires themselves” (“Freedom of the Will,” p. 17). This is to say, then, that the wanton in an important sense lacks a will: what motivates his or her actions is the desire that happens to be strongest at the moment.

Is Isabel Archer a wanton? She certainly seems to demonstrate wantonness in her open attitude toward all experiences; in the same way that the wanton does not desire one desire more or less than another, Isabel does not desire any experience more or less than another. Moreover, at one point the narrator talks about Isabel’s freedom in terms very close to Frankfurt’s: “She had never had a keener sense of freedom, of the absolute boldness and wantonness of liberty, than when she turned away from the platform at the Euston Station” (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 272). Yet calling Isabel a simple wanton cannot be quite right, if only because she does seem to care about her will in some sense—after all, she is fond of her independence. Thus, I am tempted to suggest that Isabel is a willful wanton: to use Frankfurt’s terms, the only second-order desire she has about her first-order desires is that the first-order desires not be under the control of any second-order desire. We might say, then, that Isabel wills not willing—or, in the terms that Frankfurt eventually comes to use, the only thing she cares about is that she care about nothing.

One cannot, however, remain in a state of willing wantonness, for one exists in a fundamentally vexed relationship to caring. Frankfurt considers something very like a willing wanton in a brief footnote regarding Eastern mystics, who, he thinks, “are encouraged to strive toward a condition in which the will is annihilated—in which one no longer exists as a volitional agent.”¹⁴ Thus, the telos of the truly willing wanton is the

¹⁴ Harry G. Frankfurt, “On the Usefulness of Final Ends” (1992), rpt. in his *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), p. 88, n. 8.

ceasing of all volition altogether. This ends up being paradoxical due to the fact that such a goal is so difficult to achieve, and therefore requires an intense amount of precisely the caring and willing that one wishes to avoid. Either the willing wanton ceases to be willing, because she successfully effaces her agency, or she ceases to be a wanton, because she comes to care about something in a deep, will-constituting way.

But there is perhaps a more prosaic way to account for Isabel's abandonment of her wanton life. Frankfurt is quite clear on the philosophical importance of boredom:

I believe that the avoidance of boredom is a very fundamental human urge. It is not a matter merely of distaste for a rather unpleasant state of consciousness. . . . It is of the essence of boredom that it involves an attenuation of psychic liveliness. Its tendency is to approach a complete cessation of significant differentiation within consciousness; and this homogenization is, at the limit, tantamount to the cessation of conscious experience altogether.

A substantial increase in the extent to which we are bored undermines the very continuation of psychic activity. In other words, it threatens the extinction of the active self. ("On the Usefulness of Final Ends," p. 89)

Moreover, Frankfurt explains, the way in which we avoid boredom and prevent the dissolution of the self is by coming to care deeply about something. Frankfurt is quite open-minded about what the "something" might be, since "the fact that something is important to a person is invariably a function of that person's feelings, attitudes, and intentions" (p. 89). All that is necessary is that something comes to be what Frankfurt calls a "final end," which is to say that it is genuinely important from the agent's perspective.

Simply put, Isabel is bored by the lifestyle of a wanton. Her trip through Turkey and Greece with Madame Merle is unsatisfying; thus we learn that "a certain incoherence prevailed in her," and that she "travelled rapidly and recklessly . . . like a thirsty person draining cup after cup" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 274). Moreover, after her decision to marry Osmond, her cousin Ralph challenges Isabel by noting: "A year ago you valued your liberty beyond everything. You wanted only to see

life." Isabel replies simply: "I've seen it. . . . It doesn't look to me now, I admit, such an inviting expanse" (p. 288). Raw experience, without deep emotional investment in particulars, has become monotonous and boring for Isabel. At the same time, a brief passage in the description of Isabel's final trip as an unmarried woman hints toward the solution to her boredom. The narrator tells us: "the girl had in these days a thousand uses for her sense of the romantic, which was more active than it had ever been. I do not allude to the impulse received as she gazed at the Pyramids . . . deep and memorable as these emotions had remained" (p. 275). Though the narrator does not tell us what Isabel's sense of the romantic is in fact engaged in, it is quite clear in retrospect that Isabel is beginning to care deeply for the prospect of a marriage to Gilbert Osmond.

Let us pause for a moment and consider at somewhat greater length the interaction between caring, freedom, and Isabel's initial decision to marry Osmond. Many critics have tried to argue that Isabel's marriage is in fact an expression of her desire for freedom—that Isabel sees in a relationship with Osmond a possibility for some kind of independence that would not exist in relationships with Warburton and/or Goodwood. But the passage I quoted earlier in arguing this point against Jöttkandt seems to me crucial in this regard: Isabel dreads the force of an "inspired and trustful passion" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 263), deep within herself, that will overcome her ability to choose, and she sees the existence of such a passion precisely in a relationship with Osmond.

This is something very close to the Frankfurian notion of a "care" that I alluded to earlier. A "care," for Frankfurt, is a key component of one's self; as he puts it: "A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. . . . Insofar as the person's life is in whole or in part *devoted* to anything, rather than being merely a sequence of events whose themes and structures he makes no effort to fashion, it is devoted to this."¹⁵ Frankfurt explains that agents are not in control of their cares: "A decision to care no more entails caring than a decision to

¹⁵ Harry G. Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About" (1982), rpt. in *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 83.

give up smoking entails giving it up" ("The Importance of What We Care About," p. 84). Indeed, this model of the self ends up devaluing the importance of decision as producing action, for cares produce obligations to act in certain ways precisely by constituting the will of the agent: "To the extent that such constraint actually does render it impossible for a person to act in any way other than as he acts, it renders it impossible by preventing him from *making use of* his own capacities" (p. 86). Frankfurt terms this sort of constraint a "volitional necessity" (p. 86), and I think something like this is precisely what Isabel is afraid of. She has maintained her willful wantonness only by not allowing herself to come to care about anything, but she knows that deep within her lies a strong capacity to care for something, and that this capacity is strong enough to overwhelm her wanton ways and constrain her will. She fears, in short, the obligations that she might place on herself; nevertheless, as she becomes bored and dissatisfied with the life of the wanton, she is willing to risk the constraints of caring for the meaningful life that such caring provides. Thus she tries to explain her actions to Ralph by saying: "There's nothing higher for a girl than to marry a—a person she likes" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 291). We see here the truth of Berkson's suggestion that "Isabel's vision of life has been informed by a moral zeal to make something worthwhile of her life" ("Why Does She Marry Osmond?" p. 66).

Certainly, though he would not agree that marriage was the only way to go about it, Frankfurt would agree that a life spent caring deeply about something is the highest life to which humans can aspire. As he notes, "a person's life is meaningful . . . only to the extent that it is devoted to pursuing goals that are important to him" ("On the Usefulness of Final Ends," p. 90). Would it be appropriate, then, to say that Isabel sacrifices freedom for meaning? There is a split, I think, between Frankfurt and James (or at least between Frankfurt and Isabel) on this point. Frankfurt considers something like Isabel's dilemma when he asks if an agent whose cares generated volitional necessities would experience such moments as passive—their cares in some sense trumping their agency. The answer, it turns out, is that Frankfurtian agents do not experience such

situations as a loss of freedom: “People are generally quite far from considering that volitional necessity renders them helpless bystanders to their own behavior. Indeed they may even tend to regard it as actually enhancing both their autonomy and their strength of will” (“The Importance of What We Care About,” p. 87). Or, as Frankfurt puts the point in a later text:

Suppose . . . that someone is performing an action that he wants to perform; and suppose further that his motive in performing this action is a motive by which he truly wants to be motivated. This person is in no way unwilling or indifferent either with respect to what he is doing or with respect to the desire that moves him to do it. . . .

Under these conditions, I believe, the person is enjoying as much freedom as it is reasonable for us to desire. Indeed, it seems to me that he is enjoying as much freedom as it is possible for us to conceive.¹⁶

Frankfurt is saying here that to have one’s actions determined by volitional necessity is not a loss of freedom; since caring consists in part not merely of wanting to do something, but of wanting to *want* to do that thing, there is as much freedom in an action I perform under volitional necessity as there is in anything I do.¹⁷ Thus, Frankfurt’s conclusions about freedom and determinism parallel Jötkandt’s, although the philosophical framework that the two critics would use to explain it differs.

¹⁶ Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), p. 20.

¹⁷ The reader interested in the development of Frankfurt’s thought may note that there is a tension here between caring and the first-order/second-order structure discussed in relation to the wanton: the notion of freedom under a volitional necessity seems to avoid the strong emphasis on reflexivity implicit in the earlier definition, where a person was free only if he was doing what he wanted to want. This is a complicated issue in Frankfurt; as it turns out, the notion of caring is one he appealed to in order to deal with objections to his early views. Nevertheless, the reflexivity does not disappear: Frankfurt thinks that caring somehow includes the sort of identification with a first-order desire that was the crucial step in the first model. As he puts it in his most recent book: “When we do care about something, we go beyond wanting it. We want to go *on* wanting it, at least until the goal has been reached. . . . The caring entails, in other words, a commitment to the desire” (Harry G. Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right*, ed. Debra Satz [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2006], pp. 18–19).

Not only are freedom and determinism compatible, then, but freedom under determinism—for Jöttkandt freedom in accord with the Kantian moral law; for Frankfurt freedom under control of a volitional necessity—produces an especially valuable kind of action. In fact, both Kant/Jöttkandt and Frankfurt use the same term: such an agent is “autonomous.”¹⁸

Certainly, one could read James as sharing this way of thinking about freedom and determinism, as a conversation between Ralph and Isabel after her marriage suggests:

“You were the last person I expected to see caught.”

“I don’t know why you call it caught.”

“Because you’re going to be put into a cage.”

“If I like my cage, that needn’t trouble you.” (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 288)

In the same way that Frankfurt’s caring agents experience their volitional necessities as instances of autonomy and freedom precisely because they in some sense “agree” with the care (as Frankfurt puts it elsewhere, they “identify” with the desire), so Isabel suggests that her situation will not be a cage, and she will not be “caught,” so long as she likes it. Admittedly, “like,” in this context, certainly means to “enjoy”; it might also suggest, however, a deeper sense of identification with her state.

But this seems to me to stretch the text a little too far. Isabel has not implied that her actions are somehow the culmination of her freedom; she has merely said that Ralph need not be troubled by her situation. Moreover, Ralph clearly understands her action as a sacrifice of her freedom (as do all the other characters in the novel), and it is significant that Isabel does not contradict this description. Instead, she attempts to defend her decision as achieving something better than mere freedom—after all, life is no longer “such an inviting expanse,” and the “cage” of married life is the highest life to which a woman can aspire. Thus, I am strongly inclined to suspect that Isabel certainly thinks, and that James probably thinks, that a meaningful

¹⁸ I am guided here by Frankfurt’s own discussion of his relationship to Kant (see Frankfurt, “Autonomy, Necessity, and Love” [1994], rpt. in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, pp. 129–41).

life spent deeply invested in some project or another involves an important sacrifice of freedom. Admittedly, such a life may be better: it can be meaningful. But it is not quite free.

One might object that this is rather a significant difference, and that it goes to the heart of a Frankfurtian reading of James. Yet we should recall Frankfurt's openness to the wide range of things that agents might come to care about, and the possibility for tragedy inherent in such an attitude. It seems to me that in preserving freedom as a state opposed to caring, Isabel and James register a worry about what might happen when one comes to care deeply about something: namely, it might lead to suffering. As Frankfurt acknowledges: "What fills a certain life with meaning may be some intricate and demanding conflict, or a terribly frustrating but compelling struggle, which involves a great deal of anxiety or pain and which is extremely destructive" ("On the Usefulness of Final Ends," p. 85). Or, as Isabel comes to recognize, despite her "value," she will "live only to suffer" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 466). I am tempted to suggest, then, that it would be a mistake to infer a substantive philosophical divergence in James's and Frankfurt's respective concepts of freedom: rather, I suspect, in refusing to call a life of caring a continuation of the life of freedom, James wants to point out the possibility that one might become ensnared by a volitional necessity that compels one into a life of pain.

Tragically, of course, this is what happens to Isabel. It turns out that the conception of marriage in general—and of marriage with Osmond in particular—that guided Isabel in her process of coming to care so deeply about her marriage is fundamentally mistaken: "during those months she had imagined a world of things that had no substance. She had had a more wondrous vision of [Osmond], fed through charmed senses and oh such a stirred fancy!—she had not read him right" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 357). Worse, she learns that her deep care for her marriage did not even arise spontaneously, but was rather carefully produced in a plot headed by Madame Merle. Nevertheless, simply realizing that one's cares are based on a mistaken view of the world, or are even artificially and maliciously produced, does not remove them: they remain every bit as essential a part of who one is—indeed, this is part of why the

possibility of tragedy is inherent in anyone who cares deeply. This at any rate is Frankfurt's view of the self: one is more or less what one cares about. Importantly, this is not an ethical conception of normative force; as Frankfurt points out in discussing volitional necessities: "In a sense which a strictly ethical analysis cannot make clear, what they keep us from violating are not our duties or our obligations but ourselves" ("The Importance of What We Care About," p. 91).¹⁹

Thus, when Isabel chooses to stay with Osmond at the novel's end, it is simply because to do anything else would be to violate her self. We can see Isabel's instinctive refusal to betray herself in her reaction to Caspar Goodwood's kiss; in a somewhat perplexing passage, the narrator tells us:

[Isabel] felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink. But when darkness returned she was free. She never looked about her; she only darted from the spot. . . . She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path. (*The Portrait of a Lady*, pp. 489-90)

We can see in this moment precisely the rise of a volitional necessity. Isabel has become a different person than she was at the beginning of the novel; she has come to care deeply about something. Temporarily, of course, her desire to be happy has risen, and she has briefly considered life with Goodwood; as the narrator remarks: "She had wanted help, and here was help; it had come in a rushing torrent. . . . she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying" (p. 489). When Goodwood does in fact take Isabel in his arms, however, her will, constituted by her care for her marriage, rises against her and makes Goodwood repulsive, and she perceives that she cannot do anything other than return to her husband, as unfortunate as that is. As Frankfurt notes rather grimly about an agent who believes he has changed his cares, "When

¹⁹ This is not to say that there are not ethical reasons behind Isabel's return to her marriage: she has, after all, promised to aid Pansy.

the chips are down he may discover that he is not, after all, decisively moved by the preference or motive he supposed he had adopted."²⁰ Isabel's rejection of Goodwood, then, is fundamentally different from her earlier rejection: at first, she rejected him because she did not wish to care deeply about anything; now, she is forced to reject him precisely because she does.²¹

Yet Isabel is not unknowingly compelled by her cares. I suspect that she perceives that life with Goodwood might be happy, but it could never be meaningful. What she is "free" of, then, is the—admittedly comprehensible and indeed pitiful—desire to be happy, which had clouded her perception of herself. It is in this sense that she has a "straight path" away from Goodwood and back to Italy. One might object, as Baym does, that Goodwood and Osmond do not exhaust Isabel's option: she might choose Mrs. Touchett's life. But there is a real sense in which this is not true—Isabel's volitional necessities prevent a life away from her marriage from being a real possibility.

Let me then conclude my reading of *The Portrait of a Lady* by briefly discussing a distinction that the characters themselves make, one that clearly belongs in an analysis of selfhood and subjectivity in the novel. I am thinking here of the distinction that Isabel and Madame Merle make between a "self" that finds its expression in everything outside itself and a self that finds expression in nothing. As Madame Merle puts it:

"When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By

²⁰ Harry G. Frankfurt, "The Faintest Passion" (1992), rpt. in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 101.

²¹ One might plausibly object to my reading on this point by noting that Isabel has always been repulsed by Goodwood's masculinity. Thus, there would be an important sense in which, contrary to what I am suggesting, Isabel rejects Goodwood for the same reason that she did so earlier: she perceives that she cannot be an autonomous agent while married to him. Such a reading, however, cannot deal very well with Isabel's sincere belief that Caspar Goodwood does in fact represent help: presumably, Goodwood could never have offered an escape if he was so inherently repulsive. Nevertheless, the two alternate readings might be reconcilable. There can be multiple reasons behind an action without contradiction; indeed, given the complexity of the novel, a multiplicity of reasons is not surprising. One might further note the fact that such a reading of Isabel's rejection relies on an analysis of her epistemological state, whereas the reading I am proposing hinges on her volitional nature, and it seems plausible that one's will might change while one's beliefs remain constant.

the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? . . . One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive." (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 175)

Isabel replies succinctly, saying:

"I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me." (p. 175)

Isabel's position sits rather comfortably with the Frankfortian analysis that I have laid out here. After all, at this point in the novel Isabel is firmly maintaining her independence, and refusing to allow the "inspired and trustful passion" within her to express itself. Thus, it is no surprise that there is nothing outside of herself that expresses her, since there is nothing outside of herself that she cares deeply enough about to make it part of herself in any substantive sense.

Fitting Merle into the picture is rather more complicated. After all, caring about many things is, for Frankfurt, a path to a meaningful, fulfilling life, yet the events of the novel prevent us from endorsing Merle's selfhood in any simple or straightforward way—she turns out to be, if not wicked, then "deeply, deeply, deeply" false (*The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 431). I would like to suggest that James invites us to make distinctions between wantons here. If Isabel is a wanton because she cares about nothing (i.e., because she is too fond of her independence), then the self described by Merle would be a wanton because she cared about everything (i.e., because she was too fond of the things of the world). If such a self actually existed, it would, in Frankfurt's terms, be hopelessly ambivalent.²² The self would be riven by competing cares and volitional necessities, and thus divided against itself. Taken to extremes, this sort of ambivalence ultimately erases the self and prevents psy-

²² See Frankfurt, "The Faintest Passion," p. 98.

chic unity of any sort, reducing the agent to a kind of post-care wantonness.

Of course, it turns out that Merle has purposely misrepresented herself. There are some actions that express her true self more fully than others—which is to say that she does have a core self, a care generating volitional necessities: it is her desire to secure, by any means necessary, a good life for herself, her former lover, and her daughter. In this sense, I think that *The Portrait of a Lady* reveals the inadequacy of her earlier description of herself as expressed in everything she does. This sort of agent would only be possible if there was not some core selfhood that found expression in some actions and not in others. Thus, while there are obviously significant differences, it seems to me that there is an important sense in which Isabel's and Merle's definitions of the self are actually the same: both describe an agent who does not privilege one thing over another as constitutive of her selfhood—an agent who, at the end of the day, is a wanton.

Thus is it for Merle. One might note, however, that there are several possible kinds of agents not described by the analysis I have elaborated so far. For instance, if Isabel begins *The Portrait of a Lady* as a willing wanton, then we might wonder if there is such a thing as an unwilling wanton in James's analysis of selfhood—an agent who simply lacks the “inspired and trustful passion” that Isabel fears. Moreover, we might begin to wonder about the details of caring: what are the sorts of things that agents can care about, and do cares constructed around different objects appear differently? Though *The Portrait of a Lady* does not engage these questions, I think other James novels do; thus, I will conclude this analysis by briefly considering two pivotal characters of James's late works—Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* (1903) and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902).



In the speech to “little Bilham” that James marks out as “the whole case, in fine” of *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether takes some pains to emphasize that the main injunction

of his speech, to “live all you can,” is an imperative that he himself cannot follow.²³ His explanation as to why he cannot do so is perplexing: by my count, he offers three different explanations, which may be collapsible into each other. First, he says simply: “I’m old; too old at any rate for what I see.” Second, he waxes poetic:

“The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me; for it’s at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, 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.” (*The Ambassadors*, p. 132)

The third explanation follows this one immediately, and introduces the concept of freedom: “Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don’t be, like me, without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it; I don’t quite know which” (p. 132). The speech then ends with a variation on its central injunction—this time Strether tells Bilham not to “miss things out of stupidity,” which was apparently his “mistake.”

The question, I think, concerns which of the three explanations of his inability to “live all [he] can” Strether is referring to when he claims that he made a mistake. It is worth noting, moreover, that the question depends in some sense on whether Strether is describing his inability to “live” now or his failure to “live” in some unspecified past (the “right time” that the third explanation refers to). The first explanation seems to map onto the present time; the last explanation seems to map onto the past; and the second is indeterminate. Nevertheless, since the thrust of the first explanation is that living is now beyond Strether’s power no matter what he does, and the thrust of the second explanation is that he was somehow deterministically compelled to do as he did (his consciousness was “compactly held” by the “tin mould” of his life), only the third explanation

²³ Henry James, *The Ambassadors: An Authoritative Text, the Author on the Novel, Criticism*, second edition, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1994), p. 132. Further citations are included parenthetically in the text.

could reasonably be called a “mistake.” And indeed, this is the only explanation that suggests that “living” was ever an actual possibility in Strether’s life, one that he was “too stupid or too intelligent” to take advantage of.

But, one wonders, what on earth does the illusion of freedom—actually, the memory of the illusion of freedom—have to do with living all one can? What, in short, is Strether talking about? Ultimately, I think the answer is simply that he himself does not know: while he is aware of the fact that he cannot “live all he can,” or at any rate that people like Mme. de Vionnet and Chad Newsome live in a way that he cannot, he does not really know why, and thus he offers a slew of confused explanations. Moreover, it is significant that Strether takes it for granted that people are not free, and that what he is without is either the illusion of freedom or its memory. Left unstated is what seems to me the most logical possibility—namely, that Chad and others who “live” are in fact free.

What does this freedom involve? It seems to me that it consists in the ability to invest oneself deeply in some person or project; in other words, the ability to care. This is the ability that Strether inchoately senses when he sees that Chad “know[s] how to live,” a capacity about which Strether asks himself rhetorically, “what was the meaning of the facility but that others *did* surrender themselves?” (*The Ambassadors*, p. 284). The language of surrender is significant, I think, for it links the “knowing how to live” with the language of freedom: in the same way that for Isabel coming to care about something involved the loss of her freedom, Chad’s “knowing how to live” consists in his ability to surrender himself to the objects of his cares. Strether thinks that he lacks freedom, and there is a sense in which this is correct: he lacks the deep core of selfhood that cares about things and that makes the loss of freedom implicit in caring—in surrendering—meaningful.

This reading is never clearer than in the scene between Strether and Maria Gostrey at the end of the novel. Maria offers Strether a life in Paris and a life with her, and Strether declines, explaining: “To be right. . . . That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself” (*The Ambassadors*, p. 346). In fact, Strether invokes the language of

necessity—he admits that he “can’t do anything else” than be, as Maria terms it, “so dreadfully right” (p. 347). Would it be fair to say that Strether cares about living right? Not quite—after all, he has not cared so deeply about being right that it generated volitional necessities earlier in the novel, when he was immersing himself in Parisian life. Rather, I think Strether has no ability to feel volitional necessities, and thus he takes ethics as a substitute for the sort of meaningful life that such necessities create. If the tragedy of Isabel Archer’s situation was that meaning and ethics (in the form of Pansy) demanded one kind of life while happiness demanded another, then it is Strether’s dilemma that ethics demands one life while happiness demands another, and he has no sense for the notion of a “meaningful” life that would make the selection of one or the other the right decision.

This is not the problem for Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. Indeed, it is part of Milly’s “stupendousness” that, perhaps more than any other James character, she lives a happy, meaningful, and ethical life—one that, we might say, gives poignancy to the fact of her fatal disease. Yet one might point out that Milly’s surrender of Merton Densher to her rival Kate Croix certainly seems to be a violation of a volitional necessity—surely Milly cares for Densher in the deep, will-generating way that Frankfurt thinks so important. In other words, it looks as if there is a tension between the claim that Milly lives a meaningful life and the situation I described in *The Portrait of a Lady*: somehow Isabel’s decision to stay in her marriage prevents her from betraying herself; yet I am suggesting that Milly’s decision to abandon her relationship is not a self-betrayal. Resolving this tension involves clarifying something that Frankfurt himself is not all that clear about: namely, what types of things one can care about. Specifically, the solution I want to suggest is that Isabel’s care is defined institutionally and specifically: she cares for the notion of a marriage—not just a relationship—with Gilbert Osmond, and not anyone else. Milly’s care is much broader: she cares for an ideal, and it is that ideal to which she devotes herself. Implicit in that devotion is a desire for a certain kind of relationship, but the logic of the ideal will allow Milly to abandon the relationship without thereby sacrificing the ideal.

What is this ideal? It is, I think, simply “to live.” This, at any rate, is how Sir Luke Strett poses the concept when he explains it to Milly in agreeing that she ought to go to the Continent.²⁴ Moreover, it is how Milly understands it herself in her reflections immediately afterward, and it is significant that in doing so she invokes the language of the will: “Grey immensity had somehow of a sudden become her element; grey immensity was what her distinguished friend had, for the moment, furnished her world with and what the question of ‘living,’ as he put it to her, living by option, by volition, inevitably took on for its immediate face” (*The Wings of the Dove*, p. 154). To engage in living—to live life, so to speak—is equivalent to living by “volition.” Moreover, Milly decides to embrace it: “she would affirm without delay her option, her volition; taking this personal possession of what surrounded her was a fair affirmation to start with; and she really didn’t care if she made it at the cost of alarms for Susie” (pp. 154–55). Milly, in short, decides to care deeply about living and all the variety of experiences—all the “grey immensity”—that such a life involves; in doing so, she wills her life and its activities. This is subtly different from Isabel’s desires at the beginning of *The Portrait of a Lady*, because although Isabel also wanted to experience the “grey immensity” of life, she held herself apart from it at the same time; until her marriage, Isabel insists on maintaining her ability to choose. This is not Milly’s path; affirming the “life of volition” consists in the decision to hold no part of herself aloof.

Yet surely this only complicates the problem. After all, if Milly differs from Isabel in caring about the things she encounters, then her decision to let Densher go—which she does by refusing to ask him whether he has been secretly engaged to Kate all along, a question that Densher freely admits might have forced him to abandon his affections for Kate—is a betrayal of a care (*The Wings of the Dove*, p. 363). And indeed Milly suffers the sort of psychic injury that Frankfurt associates with self-betrayal: “the volitional unity” of an agent who betrays a

²⁴ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove: An Authoritative Text, the Author and the Novel, Criticism*, second edition, ed. Richard A. Hocks (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2003), p. 153. Further citations are included parenthetically in the text.

care will be “irreparably ruptured,” and “there is a sense in which the person . . . no longer exists” (“Autonomy, Necessity, and Love, p. 139, n. 8). Tragically, of course, Milly’s suspicion of Densher’s duplicity forces her to turn “her face to the wall” (*The Wings of the Dove*, p. 334), and causes her death soon after. Crucially, Densher describes this process by saying that “her will . . . broke down” (p. 361).

Nevertheless, Milly has not completely betrayed herself, because by caring for an ideal, rather than just for Densher, Milly’s caring self is composed of a care for many objects. Moreover, if we consider that Milly’s ideal of living contains ethical and spiritual elements, embodied in her conception of herself—taken from Kate Croix—as a “dove,” then her larger ideal may produce a conflict of cares. Her desire to possess Densher herself conflicts with her broader desire to live for the happiness of others, which, given Densher’s love for Kate, requires her to surrender him—this, at any rate, seems to be how Densher comes to understand Milly’s actions.²⁵ Thus, rather than claiming that she completely avoids betraying a volitional necessity, perhaps it is better to say that Milly confronts a caring dilemma: she must choose between her care for a certain ideal of life and her care for Densher, and heroically she chooses the former, at the cost of her life.

Let us then conclude by saying something about the Jamesian self in general. As I hope to have demonstrated, there is a key sense in which Leo Bersani’s intuition that James’s “subject is freedom” is correct.²⁶ Yet I want to dispute Bersani’s gloss on what this means: Bersani explains that “we must understand that word [“freedom”] in the sense of inventions so coercive that they resist any attempt to enrich—or reduce—them with meaning,” and that ultimately the Jamesian free self displays “nostalgia for an enslaving truth which would rescue [her] from the strenuous responsibilities of inventive freedom” (*A Future for Astyanax*, pp. 132–33). In short, for Bersani’s James the self

²⁵ Thus Densher believes that “something had happened to him too beautiful and too sacred to describe. He had been, to his recovered sense, forgiven, dedicated, blessed” (*The Wings of the Dove*, p. 373).

²⁶ See Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie,” in his *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1969), p. 132.

“composes” and “invents” itself, and remains wishful for the sort of stability that would obviate the need for self-invention. Yet if the analyses I have offered here are correct, then this reading gets things rather backward. Far from having a nostalgia for an enslaving truth about themselves, we see Jamesian agents fighting against just such a truth: Isabel cannot reinvent herself as an agent who does not care for her marriage; Strether cannot create himself as an agent with the capacity to care for Maria Gostrey; and Milly cannot surrender her care for Densher without dying. As Frankfurt so succinctly puts it, our wills are not up to us. Ultimately, I wish to suggest, Henry James shows us much of the tragedy inherent in that statement.

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ABSTRACT

Patrick Fessenbecker, “Freedom, Self-Obligation, and Selfhood in Henry James” (pp. 69–95)

In this essay I argue for a new interpretation of Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880–81, revised 1908). After briefly surveying the history of interpretations of the novel, I argue that critics have failed to understand the peculiar nature of Isabel Archer’s volitional state, particularly in her decision to stay with her abusive husband at the end of the novel. Isabel, I demonstrate, is constrained in an important and binding way, but the source of the constraint is simply herself, in a philosophically perplexing way. This essay attempts to illuminate these features of the novel by drawing on the philosophical resources in Harry G. Frankfurt’s works, particularly his notion of “wantons,” or agents who do not care about their wills and thus are in an important sense not persons, as well as his concept of a “volitional necessity,” a complex of cares, desires, and beliefs that is so essential to an agent’s personhood that actions on behalf of the necessity feel inevitable. Though the agent cannot help but act on the necessity, she nevertheless feels importantly free, because the compulsory force is simply her self. The essay then concludes by briefly suggesting how these Frankfurtian ideas might suggest new interpretations of other James novels, which I introduce through short discussions of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Ambassadors* (1903).

Keywords: Henry James; *The Portrait of a Lady*; Harry G. Frankfurt; Volitional Necessity; wantons