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# Place and Psychogeography in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*[*]

Miejsce i psychogeografia w *Ambasadorach* Henry'ego Jamesa

SOUAD BAGHLI BERBAR
University of Tlemcen, Algeria
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4091-2306
e-mail: berbar.souad@gmail.com; souad.baghli@univ-tlemcen.dz

**Abstract.** Following the recent spatial turn in literary criticism and the shift of focus on place, the present paper examines the special significance of place in Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors* (1903) and explores the relationship between geography and psychology through the main character, Lambert Strether. Analysing the latter's outer and inner observations draws on a close reading of the novel and the instrumentation of such theories as psychogeography and psychoanalytical criticism. Strether's trip is an introspective voyage as much as an exploratory expedition, allowing insight into his subconsciousness through the tropes of the places he traverses. His mental visions of spaces in the novel can be surmised in terms of a psychogeography of his movements, a sort of landscape of the mind which is a reflection of the Freudian perception of the human psyche.

**Keywords:** place, psychogeography, mindscape, Henry James, *The Ambassadors*

**Abstrakt.** Podążając za niedawnym zwrotem przestrzennym w krytyce literackiej i przesunięciem punktu ciężkości na miejsce, niniejszy artykuł bada szczególne znaczenie miejsca w powieści Henry'ego Jamesa *Ambasadorowie* (1903) i bada związek między geografią i psychologią poprzez głównego bohatera Lamberta Strethera. Analiza zewnętrznych i wewnętrznych obserwacji tego ostatniego opiera się na bliskiej lekturze powieści oraz instrumentarium takich teorii jak psychogeografia i krytyka psychoanalityczna. Podróż Strethera jest w równym stopniu podróżą introspektywną, co

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eksploracyjną, pozwalającą na wgląd w jego podświadomość poprzez tropiki przemierzanych miejsc. Jego mentalne wizje przestrzeni w powieści można rozpatrywać w kategoriach psychogeografii jego ruchów, swoistego krajobrazu umysłu, na który wpływa freudowskie postrzeganie ludzkiej psychiki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** miejsce, psychogeografia, krajobraz myśli, Henry James, *Ambasadorowie*

Henry James is both a travel writer and a novelist who can capture the spirit of place even in fictional terms. His famous novel *The Ambassadors* (1903), though featuring American characters, is wholly set in England and France. It tells the transatlantic trip of Lambert Strether as Mrs Newsome's envoy to retrieve her son Chad from the clutches of Parisian society. The myriad of settings introduced in the novel invite an exploration of James's particular employment of place to convey his character's growth and understanding not only of himself but others as well. The recent "spatial turn" in literary criticism (Tardy, 2021) and the abundant spatial images and metaphors underscore the significance of place in literary works, for the term "metaphor" itself means "a change of place" according to its Greek etymological origin as found in *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2002, p. 898).

The renewed interest in the notion of place in literature calls for crossing the boundaries of conventional criticism and drawing from other disciplines as Tim Cresswell invites us in his re-edition of *Place: An Introduction* where he surmises that place, as a concept, "travels quite freely between disciplines and the study of place benefits from an interdisciplinary approach" (2015, p. 1). Mikhail M. Bakhtin is renowned for coining the "chronotope" which can be understood as "time-space" and which means the literary combination of time and place or "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). He exemplifies the interweaving of place and the character's mind that is the focus of this paper when he claims that:

> The most characteristic thing about this novel is the way it fuses the course of an individual's life (at its major turning points) with his actual spatial course or road − that is, with his wanderings. Thus is realized the metaphor "the path of life". (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 120)

The same preoccupation is found in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's travel writings where he states that "from whatever place I write, you will expect that part of my 'Travels' will consist of excursions in my own mind" (1817, p. 494). Such intertwining of place and mind is at the heart not only of psychoanalytical or Freudian criticism but also of the more recent theories of Psychogeography and Geocriticism. Sigmund Freud's pairing of the ego with place when he suggests that "where id was, there ego shall be" (1933, p. 79) evokes the relation between physical location and consciousness and the subconscious in a kind of psychological place.

By the same token, Julia Bray links place to the "landscape of the mind" and refers to "an inner map, which the traveller will be likely to project on to any landscapes met with in the future, and to steer by, whether or not it fits with reality" (2009, p. 199). The correlation of place, mind and literature is the focus of "Psychogeography" which was introduced by the "Situationists" headed by Guy-Ernest Debord in the 1950s and 1960s. In his "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography", Debord admits that the coinage belongs to an illiterate Kabyle who used the term as a juxtaposition of "psyche" and "geography" to describe the influence of place on the human mind (2006, p. 8). For Debord, "Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (2006, p. 8).

More recently, the field of Psychogeography has been further explored by Will Self in in his explanatory *Psychogeography: Disentangling the Modern Conundrum of Psyche and Place* (2007). Self discerns the "personality of place itself" (2007, p. 11) from the "phrenology" of places like London, in addition to "deep topography" which he defines as "minutely detailed, multi-level examinations of select locales that impact upon the writer's own microscopic inner-eye" (Self, 2007, p. 11). This last aspect of Psychogeography is more convenient for the exploration of the effect of places on the psyche of Strether in James's novel.

Cities are the main concern of Psychogeography as promoted by Debord in his *Guide Psychogéographique de Paris* (1957) where he proposes to map the discourse of passions in "the naked city" of Paris (Debord and Jorn, 1957, p. 68), but Psychogeography can be applied to any place to study the reflections of the outer space on the inner mind. It originated in Charles Baudelaire's symbolist poetry and his image of *flâneur* which later forged that of "the mental traveller" associated with French "*robinsonner*, meaning to travel mentally" (Coverly, 2010, p. 20). In his introduction to *Psychogeography*, Merlin Coverly stresses the concern of English writing with "the imaginary voyage, a journey that reworks and re-imagines the layout of the urban labyrinth" (2010, p. 15).

Seeing other places through travel allows a deeper understanding not only of landscape but also of mindscape. Such enlightenment is best achieved through movement, mirroring the evolution of meaning constructed from images. The dichotomy of inner and outer space, which Gaston Bachelard defines as "the dialectics of inside and outside" that "multiply with countless diversified nuances" (1958, p. 216), has focused the attention of French critics. Indeed, Maurice Blanchot draws on Bachelard to develop the notion of inner and outer entanglement when proposing "a point where space is at once intimacy and exteriority, a space which, outside, would in itself be spiritual intimacy" (1982, p. 136).

Furthermore, in his *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti reveals a "geography of literature" (1998, p. 1),"mapping" the geography of western novels in a sort of atlas to highlight the relationship between place and novels. In his own words, "such literary geography… may indicate the study of *space in literature*; or else, of *literature in space*" (Moretti, 1998, p. 3, italics in the original). This contention has given birth to Geocriticism, which, as stated by its main proponent, Bertrand Westphal, "probes the human spaces that the mimetic arts arrange through, and in, text, the image and the cultural interactions related to them" (2011, p. 6). In *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Westphal advocates a novel theory in the study of literature, "focused on a systematically geocentric or geocentered approach" (quoted by Prieto, 2011, p. 19). For Westphal, "geocritical analysis involves the confrontation of several optics, that correct, nourish and mutually enrich each other" (2011, p. 113). Thus, Geocriticism and psychogeography are very helpful to analyse *The Ambassadors* which is a novel based on the depiction of places and movements.

The psychoanalytical dimension of Henry James's works has never ceased to focus critical attention, whether in relation to Freud as in "The James Family: Psychoanalysis and Fiction" by Richard Hocks (1989) or for post-Freudian considerations that can be found in John Carlos Rowe's (1984) "After Freud: Henry James and Psychoanalysis", and more recently in "The Genius of the Unconscious: Psychoanalytic Criticism" by Julie Rivkin (2004) and *L'aventure négative: Une lecture psychanalytique d'Henry James* by André Green (cited by Chambrier-Slama, 2013).*Thinking in Henry James* by Sharon Cameron (1991) is also of notable relevance to this exploration of Strether's mindscape as is Mark McGurl's "Social Geometries: Taking Place in Henry James" (1999). While drawing on these interpretations of the role of the psyche in the Jamesian novel, my focus will involve the symbolic intertwinement of place and mind, scenery and psyche, river and consciousness; discovering the self through knowledge of the other in different geographies.

In his reading of "The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*", Cedric Wattsholds that the opening of the novel is "an immediate immersion in the processes of the hero's mind as he's involved in perplexities which are characteristic of the novel as a whole" (1960, p. 271). These mental processes which are linked to Strether's movements as he arrives to Europe exemplify Henry James's way of projecting the protagonist's thoughts onto the surrounding places in which he finds himself.

The novel commences with "Strether's first question" upon his arrival to Britain after his transatlantic crossing, hinting that such self-inquiring succeeds best in states of travel and change of place. From the start, James leads us into his character's mind, even though indirectly without using the first-person narrative, and introduces his particular method of making Strether's spatial motions concur with his observations of the places around him and the flow of his ideas.

The development of his self-awareness is a long process that requires him to pass through several locations before fulfilling his ambassadorial mission. This is why he does not head straight to Paris where Chad is, but lands first in Liverpool and journeys through England before reaching France. He is thus able to probe into his own mind and discover more about himself, before seeking convenient opportunities to watch Chad and convince him to return home to Woolett, Massachusetts. His stay in England is not long but it nevertheless allows him to embark on the process of matching his physical trip with hints at his psychological state in a kind of psychogeography that is revealed through third-person or heterodiegetic narrative. Such deep insight into his mind requires a journey since it was not reached in his Massachusetts home where all the places are familiar, for Strether "had the consciousness of opening to it […] all the windows of his mind, of letting this rather grey interior drink in for once the sun of a clime not marked in his old geography" (p. 112). His "grey interior", faintly apprehended, is to be peered at via the mental "windows" thus opened during his trip; for mindscape is inspired by landscape, and new perspectives and other geographies are necessary to throw light on consciousness and even subconsciousness.

Metaphors of place that transcend the tangible world suggest that Strether's journey in *The Ambassadors* is a metaphysical examination of the inner self and a personal quest of self-discovery. Thus, he is "moving verily in a strange air and on ground not of the firmest" (p. 158) and "the thing indeed really unmistakeable was its rolling over him as a wave that he had been, in conditions incalculable and unimaginable" (p. 129). These symbolic references to a strange and otherworldly plane that may not be imagined or calculated denote a metaphysical or spiritual dimension that can be surmised to evoke his psyche with its conscious and subconscious components.

Strether's self-discovery begins in Liverpool and is ushered through the metaphor of a mirror that he peeps into in his hotel.

> Strether's sense of himself […] before the dressing-glass that struck him as blocking further, so strangely, the dimness of the window of his dull bedroom; begun with a sharper survey of the elements of Appearance than he had for a long time been *moved* to make. (p. 16, italics – S.B.B.)

His self-awareness when seeing himself in the looking-glass is rendered in terms of "sense" and meaning, not as a simple picture of his appearance, and the "dimness" produced by the large mirror blocking the light from the window, though it prevents actual observation, makes him more inclined towards inner examination that needs no sunlight. This self-examination was spurred by paying fresh attention to his image such as he had not experienced in a long time, when he had resided

in his hometown. The new place has motivated this alteration in his attitude and coincided with a motion that is both physical and mental.

The blending of mindscape and landscape is found in the "images of his inward picture […] deeply mixed with" (p. 20) the English places he visits like "the tower of the cathedral, now admirably commanded by their station, the high red-brown mass, square and subordinately spired and crocketed, retouched and restored, but charming to his long-sealed eyes" (p. 20). Strether's eyes are unsealed at last, allowing him wider perceptions as well as deeper insights. His mental improvement and elevation are symbolized in his newly-reached commanding place soaring above the cathedral's tallest pinnacle, which is metaphorically positioned beneath him.

Of all the geographical places that display strong correlations between place and mind in the novel, rivers are the most conspicuous symbols for the psyche, revealing a sort of psychogeography based on the mental visions of Strether's wanderings. James's choice of rivers may stem from their association with the image of the "stream of consciousness" coined by his brother William James (Hu, 2016).

Thus, Strether's initial experience of a European place occurs at Liverpool, more precisely near the Mersey River, which is described in terms of psychological images: "such a consciousness of personal freedom as he hadn't known for years; such a deep taste of change […] They formed a qualified draught of Europe, an afternoon and an evening on the banks of the Mersey" (p. 14). The running flow of the stream reflects Strether's new feeling of freedom in Europe and his stroll along its banks allows his thoughts to run freely, liberating his consciousness, which is undergoing salutary change as a consequence of his visit to this place. The river metaphor is also employed as a blending of flowing motion with conscious and also subconscious association of thoughts as when he finds "himself at last remembering on what current of association he had been floated so far" (p. 60).

Near the Liverpool river, Strether is a different person from the one he was in America. Now, he is "not a man to neglect any good chance for reflexion" (p. 60), ready for further self-probing and more thought-provoking inclinations as would take place in France.

His next destination is Paris where the Seine River is presented as a metaphor for the merging of physical and mental planes:

> the shining barge-burdened Seine; where, for an hour, in the matter of letting himself go, of diving deep, Strether was to feel he had touched bottom. He was to feel many things on this occasion, and one of the first of them was that he had travelled far since that evening in London. (p. 166)

He can investigate his inner self and recognize, among other things, how much he has understood by imaginatively diving into the river of his mind and

hitting its bottom. His understanding is substantially conveyed through his change of place, as the Strether who is presently in Paris is not the same as the one that has travelled across England from Woollett. He will further gain deeper insights into his consciousness while roaming in the French capital. The role of Paris in *The Ambassadors* has been under considerable scrutiny, notably by Erika Dreifus (2004) who considers that "Paris assumes qualities that are almost character-like, and it exerts agency and power – its transformative aspects on the »real« characters become manifestly clear" (Dreifus, 2004, p. 48).

My focus is on the specific pattern of psychogeography that James implements in *The Ambassadors* which can be read as a reflection of the Freudian elements of the human psyche embodied in the image of a place crossed by a river. The ego, which is the seat of consciousness, is represented as a stream in a central position dividing the superego from the id (Freud, 1933). Thus, Strether's mind is projected into the geographical representation of Paris which is split by the Seine River into the Right Bank and the Left Bank. He is figuratively gliding on the river of his consciousness while continually passing from one side of the city to the other; "he came down the Rue de la Paix in the sun and, passing across the Tuileries and the river" (p. 54) and "over the river was where Madame de Vionnet lived" (p. 134). The superego is symbolized by the right bank which Strether, together with most Americans in Paris, chose as a dwelling, figuratively characterized by the rightful values of his New England world, the peace and bright sunshine of its rue de la Paix. On the other hand, the home of Chad and Mme de Vionnet is on the left bank, which may represent the id and its instinctive surges with its Latin Quarter and highly-imaginative, rebellious communities. Strether is then torn between these two places and their corresponding psychological drives.

Henry James subtly uses physical locations to convey the psychological nature of the subconscious, particularly in rural areas where rivers and other natural landscapes are more frequent than in cities like Paris. The Lambinet scene towards the end of the novel has attracted the analytical focus of many critics of *The Ambassadors* for its unique narrative technique or "second-order" observation (Luhmann, 2000). It features Strether resting on a river shore in the French countryside and watching the scenery that is completely identical to his remembrance of a Lambinet painting he had longed to possess. This episode is an outstanding instance of psychogeography as his mental picture and psychological reaction are mirrored in the geographical place facing him:

> The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and river […] a river of which he didn't know, and didn't want to know, the name – fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them; the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white

and the church on the right was grey; it was all there, in short – it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover he was freely walking about in it. (pp. 292–293)

As Strether imagines "the little Lambinet" painting (p. 292) he had planned to purchase in Boston with its corresponding imagery of hamlet and stream, the actual scene in front of him appears as though in a kind of mental mirror. The psychogeography that is thus created is stemming from an inner image, from his own mind and his memories of the painted landscape, and is transferred onto his environment, which also seems to be quite similar to it. Hence, the place around him transforms into a geography of the mind, and he sees himself superimposed onto it, moving freely through it as he observes it, thus, combining exterior discovery with introspection.

The unnamed river is evidently an allusion to his hidden ego which needs to be unearthed, while the grey church on the right, with its evocation of severe religious commandments, symbolizes the super ego, and the white village on the left epitomizes the id as instinctual drives and pure human nature likened to a white sheet. Tremont Street in America and France are real locations whereas The Lambinet is an imagined place from a painting, so that the three sites that are mentioned successively combine at once his physical trips and psychological travel.

Henry James has recourse to a similar form of psychogeography in even narrower and more confined places like Mme de Vionnet's apartment:

she went part of the way with him, accompanying him out of the room and into the next and the next. Her noble old apartment offered a succession of three, the first two of which indeed, on entering, smaller than the last, but each with its faded and formal air, enlarged the office of the antechamber and enriched the sense of approach. Strether fancied them, liked them, and, passing through them with her more slowly now, met a sharp renewal of his original impression. He stopped, he looked back; the whole thing made a vista… It was doubtless half the projection of his mind. (p. 225)

The reason for Chad's refusal to leave Paris and the nature of his relations with Mme de Vionnet are still obscure for Strether when he visits her flat, with its three rooms evoking the three components of the psyche. Her place is not merely an actual space but a psychological "projection" of Strether's psyche which can be experienced by crossing them in ponderous succession. The two small and analogous rooms with their "faded" appearance may correspond to the hidden, unconscious, superego and id whereas the "enlarged" one that "enriched his sense of approach" and helped his discernment is the symbolic counterpart of his conscious ego. James plays on the double sense of "fancy" which indicates both fondness and fantasy, and shows Strether unhurriedly moving and stopping again to have a more comprehensive vision of the place, hereby mirroring the corresponding motions to

his reflections and his gradual comprehension if not of Mme de Vionnet but more likely of his self-knowledge. "The vista" that is thus offered him, with its double meaning of place and mental picture, and his complete awareness of "half the projection of his mind" (p. 225) explicitly express how the real apartment turns into a mental vision, a reflection of his inner sight.

The description of Strether strolling in Paris upon his arrival there is associated with "the plentitude of his consciousness" (p. 55), drawing a correspondence between his mind and the place around him. His recollections of a prior visit to the Luxembourg Gardens as young man accompanied by his wife who is now dead are conveyed through images of physical movement as in "pilgrimage" (p. 58) and "sailing" (p. 58) juxtaposed with the evocation of an imaginative trip as "sudden flights of fancy" (p. 58). "It was at present as if the backward picture had hung there, the long crooked course, grey in the shadow of his solitude" (p. 57). The recollections of his former visit are rendered in the form of a grey picture, physically hanging on the gardens, but also metaphorically dark and hidden in the recesses of his subconscious mind. His present presence there as the ambassador of Mrs Newsome is associated with "sequences he had missed and great gaps in the procession" (p. 59), which he has to fill not only in terms of a new and more complete way of seeing the place but also as supplementing missing parts in his self-knowledge.

James likens Strether's trip to France to a "drift" (p. 55), unexpectedly employing the terminology of Psychogeography coined by Debord as *dérive* (2006), later translated as "drifting" (Self, 2007), and evoking movement in water. It "floated him unspent up the Rue de Seine and as far as the Luxembourg" (p. 55), to develop the notion of the stream of his own consciousness out of the floating metaphor, thereby confirming the psychological nature of place in the novel.

When in Paris, Strether has repeatedly "given himself up to the town and to his thoughts, wandered and mused" (p. 181). The city as a place is correlated with his mental visions and his wandering movements are accompanied by musing, uniting the psychology of the character to the geography of the setting. In his eyes, Paris "twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next" (p. 60). The physical space is blurred, changing and even melting, suggesting a metaphysical image rather than a solid place. The apparent surface which he can see transforms into a deep mystery, pointing to his inner mindscape rather than the real landscape.

When in a deep state of agitation following the arrival of another female ambassador from Woolett to fulfil the mission he failed in, Strether "had walked and re-walked the court while he awaited her advent; acquiring in this exercise an amount of light that affected him at the time as flooding the scene" (p. 264). His

pacing movement in the space of the court is accompanied by the spiritual perception of a light that points more to understanding and mental enlightenment than actual sunlight. The "flooding" metaphor that suggests flowing water can again be interpreted as Strether's consciousness which is projected onto his surroundings.

Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors* is found to play on several aspects related to place. Its main character Strether is keen on daydreaming as he moves about and ridden with visions which are projections of his unconscious drives onto his familiar surroundings. For him, seeing is not only observing in order to know, but rather sensing through an inner eye and even vaguely and unconsciously acting upon imagined hints. James draws upon a blending of psychology into geography to produce innovative forms of spatial visions whereby rivers in towns and countryside represent the flowing stream of consciousness while the banks embody the subconscious Freudian elements of the super ego and the id. Places, rivers as well as mirrors are part of the novel's psychogeography as mental images of Strether's inner and outer universe.

In *The Ambassadors*, movements in space parallel the double process of outer comprehension with inner exploration despite the third-person point of view that provides rather indirect perceptions of the processes in the character's mind. Henry James has used a kind of psychogeography or mindscape in which Strether's consciousness and even subconsciousness are superimposed onto the environments around him that symbolically match his mental pictures. The notion of place in this literary work is multidimensional; it is not merely a reference to physical space but also encompasses mindscape and even subconscious components.

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