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Lawrence Berkove

Henry James and Sir Walter Scott: A "Virtuous Attachment"?



In a 1967 article on Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, L. Moffitt Cecil called attention to an interesting phrase, "virtuous attachment," which little Bilham used to describe the relationship between Chad Newsome and Madame de Vionnet.¹ As Cecil interprets the novel, the phrase is James's key to the revelation that all codified morality is ultimately inadequate. Strether becomes knowledgeable and wise in direct proportion to the degree to which he sees beyond and outgrows the prejudices of Woollett and the limitations of Paris. The phrase, however, may have even greater significance in the novel as well as unexpected importance to the study of James in the light of its possible origin in an essay by Sir Walter Scott.

In *The Ambassadors*, begun in 1900 and published in 1903, the phrase first occurs in the fourth book when Lambert Stether and little Bilham discuss their mutual friend, Chad Newsome. Strether is a newcomer to Paris and has been sent there by Chad's mother to rescue her son from a woman who is ostensibly keeping him from returning to the family, the family's business, and the family's strait moral code in Woollett, Mass. Little Bilham is an expatriate American who has found himself in Paris and intends never to return home. He answers Strether's questions about Chad, but more obscurely than Strether at first realizes. He says less and more than is immediately apparent.

When Strether asks if there is some woman who is doing with Chad what she likes, Bilham acknowledges that there is a woman, but adds that Chad is not happy and "wants to be free. He isn't used, you see...to being so good." When Strether asks, "Why isn't he free if he's good?", Bilham answers, "Because it's a virtuous attachment."²

It is a strikingly pregnant phrase, all of whose possible denotations and connotations--and their combinations--ultimately appear in the novel, and it is richly ironic. Not until the end of the novel does Strether realize that he has been told a technical lie,³ but by that time he has come to understand and accept the larger meaning and larger truth of the phrase. No longer, then, does he persist in his assignment to save a younger man from the designs of a supposedly mercenary and selfish older woman. Now he sees that Madame de Vionnet is much the finer person of the two, is being used by Chad, is aware of it but is helpless to prevent herself from being abandoned. Chad does not love her; there is only an "attachment." Chad does not love anybody, his family included; the young man is as yet incapable of giving love. In the continued attachment of the two, however, Strether sees a union of benefit to both. Madame de Vionnet does love Chad and, if not "good," she is at least good for him. For the sake of the virtue that will accrue to both from their attachment, Strether at the end takes the side of Madame de Vionnet and urges Chad to stay with her so that she can do more for him.⁴

The possible origin of the key phrase, "virtuous attachment," may be found in an 1815 review by Sir Walter Scott of Jane Austen's *Emma*. The review is favorable to *Emma* but also perceptively notes that it is indicative of a change in novelistic direction away from the sentimental and romantic towards the realistic, the accurate rendition of familiar experience. Scott, of course, was himself a romantic and the phrase in question occurs in a context of nostalgia for the rapidly fading belief in true love at first sight.

One word, however, we must say in behalf of that once powerful divinity, Cupid, king of gods and men, who in these times of revolution, has been assailed, even in his own kingdom of romance, by the authors who were formerly his devoted priests. We are quite aware that there are few instances of first attachment being brought to a happy conclusion, and that it seldom can be so in a state of society so highly advanced as to render early marriages among the better class, acts, generally speaking, of imprudence. But the youth of this realm need not at present be taught the doctrine of selfishness. It is by no means

their error to give the world or the good things of the world all for love; and before the authors of moral fiction couple Cupid indivisibly with calculating prudence, we would have them reflect, that they may sometimes lend their aid to substitute more mean, more sordid, and more selfish motives of conduct, for the romantic feelings which their predecessors perhaps fanned into too powerful a flame. Who is it, that in his youth has felt a virtuous attachment, however romantic or however unfortunate, but can trace back to its influence much that his character may possess of what is honourable, dignified, and disinterested?⁵

In addition to the phrase, "virtuous attachment," Scott's passage contains other salient features which, taken together, constitute a remarkable anticipation of *The Ambassadors*. Both texts describe upper class youths who are selfish and calculating. Both texts portray situations in which those youths find themselves romantically attached for the first time. Both texts contrast the young men to older men who see a virtue in those first attachments that the youths themselves do not; in both texts the older men at least think it possible, if not probable, that under certain conditions those attachments might be brought to a happy conclusion. And in both texts love is regarded as a good which brings happiness, though it takes away freedom. This latter point, moreover, is one which both Scott and James intimate is something that experience teaches; for this reason a selfish and calculating youth may bar himself from ever benefitting from it; for this reason the older men who wish the youths well counsel them not to be precipitous in terminating their virtuous attachments. Finally, Scott's comments are specially directed towards "authors of moral fiction," and if James in *The Ambassadors* follows Scott in the other details, he answers to him in this one, too.

These parallels between the Scott essay and *The Ambassadors* are, I believe, too numerous and too significant to be merely coincidental. Scott was a novelist with whose works James was very familiar. His first critical essay, in fact, was a defense of Scott against a critic who had, in James's opinion, underestimated him. It is interesting to note in that essay, written in 1864, a number of characteristics and attitudes which are classically Jamesian: the talent of making fine and subtle distinctions, the intense concentration upon aesthetic considerations in the evaluation of a novelist's art, and the belief that a novel be directed to the end of enabling readers not simply to sit in judgment upon actors in a moral drama but to understand *lifelike* characters. Although he never again

wrote a sustained evaluation of Scott, throughout his life he did praise him superlatively and he repeatedly classified Scott as one of the greatest novelists. As late as 1908 he included Scott in a list of "fine painters of life" along with Shakespeare, Cervantes, Balzac, Fielding, Thackeray, Dickens, George Meredith, George Eliot, and Jane Austen.⁶ Considering that James is not only a great novelist himself but also, by any standard, one of the foremost students of the novel, his life-long admiration of Scott should not be dismissed lightly. Perhaps a better appreciation of what James saw in Scott can lead to a better understanding of James.

Certainly, in the great tradition of the novel, James was first of all interested in verisimilitude of character, the ability to portray a fictional figure so persuasively as to induce the reader to believe in his reality. This overriding consideration is present even in James's essay on Scott, in which he criticized the novels of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett for being too didactic, and their authors for being "emphatically preachers and moralists." All three, he charged, aimed "to instruct and to edify." He contrasted Scott's *Waverley* to their novels and praised it for undertaking "to prove nothing but facts," for being "the novel irresponsible."⁷ If at first, James, unlike Scott, seemed to exclude morality as a central interest of the novel, he soon clarified his purpose by distinguishing the author's obtrusive imposition of morality for didactic purposes from the novelist's focus upon morality as a means of disclosing the emotions, intelligence, and moral consciousness of his characters. James thus came to regard morality as a means of adding depth to important experiences, such as passion and love, and of enabling an artist to create portraits lifelike in fine character as well as in appearance. Consequently, in an 1877 essay on George Sand, James relinquished his early purely aesthetic position that a novel should only please and not also instruct.

The point is made delicately, in two stages. In the first, he arrives at an appreciation of the lengths to which verisimilitude can be carried.

The reproach brought against her by her critics is that she has for the most part portrayed vicious love, not virtuous love. By the reply to this, from her own side, would be that she has at all events portrayed something which those who disparage her activity have not portrayed. She may claim that although she has the critics against her, the writers of her own class who represent virtuous love have not pushed her out of the field. She has the advantage that she has portrayed a *passion*, and those of

the other group have the disadvantage that they have not. In English literature, which I suppose is more especially the region of virtuous love, we do not "go into" the matter, as the phrase is (I speak of course of English prose). We have agreed among our own confines that there is a certain point at which all elucidation of it should stop short; that among the things which it is possible to say about it, the greater number had on the whole better not be said. It would be easy to make an ironical statement of the English attitude, and it would be, if not easy, at least very possible, to make a sound defense of it. The thing with us, however, is not a matter of theory; it is above all a matter of practice, and the practice has been that of the leading English novelists. Miss Austen and Sir Walter Scott, Dickens and Thackeray, Hawthorne and George Eliot have all represented young people in love with each other; but no one of them has, to the best of my recollection, described anything that can be called a passion--put it into motion before us, and shown us its various paces. To say this is to say at the same time that these writers have spared us much that we consider disagreeable, and that George Sand has not spared us; but it is to say furthermore that few persons would resort to English prose fiction for any information concerning the ardent forces of the heart--for any ideas upon them. It is George Sand's merit that she has given us ideas upon them--that she has enlarged the novel-reader's conception of them, and proved herself in all that relates to them an authority. This is a great deal. From this standpoint Miss Austen, Walter Scott, and Dickens will appear to have omitted the erotic sentiment altogether, and George Eliot will seem to have treated it with singular austerity.⁸

To give the reader "ideas" about the "ardent forces of the heart" is clearly an idea that James is interested in--because he understands this idea as an added dimension to the novelist's objective of creating lifelike renditions of human beings. In his admiration of George Sand's accomplishment of portraying a passion, James arrives at a highwater mark in his predilection for "the novel irresponsible," for novels which undertake "to prove nothing but facts." But having come this far, he has now apparently separated himself from the English novelists he most admires, including Sir Walter Scott, for the purely factual and "irresponsible" theory of novel writing has led directly to George Sand and her portrayal of passion, whereas Scott explicitly described novels as a species of moral fiction and defended the importance of a "virtuous attachment" in

the representation of a character. Also, in any case, the practice of James's favorite English novelists had been to remain within the region of virtuous love.

At this point, James faced a dilemma. He had held inconsistent ideas about Scott, and the novel. Either his original praise of Scott's factualness and "irresponsibility" had been incorrect or his admiration of Scott and other great English novelists was importantly misplaced. Unless he wished to persist in an inconsistency, James now had to decide which of the two directions led to the greatest future for the novel; pure realism, a faithful copying of nature, or an adherence to a moral tradition in the depiction of human life. James made his choice in the second stage of the essay, which begins in its next paragraph. Significantly, it opens with a recognition of one of George Sand's deficiencies:

The distinction between virtuous and vicious love is not particularly insisted upon by George Sand. In her view love is always love, and is always of divine essence and of ennobling effect. The largest life possible is to hold one's self open to an unlimited experience of it.⁹

From here he moves to another charge:

The author illuminates and glorifies the divine passion, but she does something which may be best expressed by saying that she cheapens it. She handles it too much; she lets it too little alone. Above all she is too positive, too explicit, too business-like; she takes too technical a view of it.¹⁰

Charge follows charge throughout the rest of the essay: she lacks discrimination "between what is agreeable and possible to people of delicacy"; she lacks moral taste; she mistakes the psychology-and-physiology-of love-making for the inner relations of the sexes.¹¹ The ironic conclusion of this string of charges is that, in failing to distinguish between virtuous and vicious love, George Sand failed to achieve realism.

In saying that George Sand lacks truth the critic more particularly means that she lacks exactitude--lacks the method of truth. Of a certain general truthfulness she is full to overflowing; we feel that to her mind nothing human is alien. I should say of her not that she *knew* human nature, but that she felt it. At all events she loved it and enjoyed it. She was contemplative; but she was not, in the deepest sense, observant. She was a very

high order of sentimentalist, but she was not a moralist. She perceived a thousand things, but she rarely in strictness judged; so that although her books have a great deal of wisdom, they have not what is called weight.¹²

It must be noted, in this passage, that James has clearly and definitively rejected the goal of "undertaking to prove nothing but facts" and the notion of "the novel irresponsible." It must also be noted that James has at last ranged himself on the side of the moralists. How strongly he feels about his new position is made clear in the essay's concluding lines, in which he maintains that she is not an idealist, but only an optimist.

An optimist "lined," as the French say, with a romancer, is not the making of a moralist. George Sand's optimism, her idealism, are very beautiful, and the source of that impression of largeness, luminosity, and liberality which she makes upon us. But I suspect that something even better in a novelist is that tender appreciation of actuality which makes even the application of a single coat of rose color seem an act of violence.¹³

James does not deny George Sand an ability to transform intense emotions into impressive artistic achievements, but he finds that her inability to perceive moral distinctions in the persons and acts of her characters ultimately renders these achievements over-simplifications or technical accomplishments.

With this insight, James moved closer to Scott rather than away from him, for he had found it possible to defend "the English attitude" of favoring virtuous love on the ground that it kept open the way to a deeper verisimilitude of character. An important clue to the reason for this is in the relationship between his claim that George Sand did not *know* human nature and his lifelong preference for Sir Walter Scott and other leading English novelists, because they did. What is at the center of the issue is the position that man *is* a moral being, that the moralists are closer to the truth than the descriptive realists in their recognition of this fact, and that literature cannot do justice to human life unless it regards the actions of human beings as consequences of their moral consciousness. In accepting this position, James at last brought himself into profound accord with the novelists he most deeply admired and was able to reconcile his aesthetic convictions about the craft of being a novelist with his newly realized values regarding the moral obligations of being a novelist.¹⁴ Once he had come to understand that the novel was a species of

moral fiction because man was a moral being and that it was alike "wrong," artistically false and intellectually dishonest, to either add moral color to or withhold it from a subject whose precise moral color was exactly the fact the artist had to capture, he had discovered the way once and for all to marry his intellectual insistence that a novelist be a perceptive and accurate observer of human nature with the moral view he had now come to terms with, that it was a virtue not to violate the human heart. In that same review essay of *Emma*, Scott had prepared the way for James when he had praised Emma, in so many ways different from his own kind of writing, for having "a knowledge of the human heart, with the power and resolution to bring that knowledge to the service of honour and virtue."¹⁵ It is therefore significant in *The Ambassadors* that Strether not only sets out to persuade Chad to be virtuous and honorable, but actually, at the end, does in fact so counsel him. Strether's divergence from the standards of Woollett, his increased appreciation of the "virtuous attachment," and his increased knowledge of the human heart should not deflect us from the realization that all of this only deepened, and did not otherwise change, his own personal dedication and service to "honour and virtue."

It is now possible to see added significance in the phrase "virtuous attachment." At the very least, the phrase in the novel may have originated in the review by Scott. If so, it surely remained with James as the germ of an idea which continued to grow in his mind. Certainly, by the time he began to write his own novels he depicted moral attachments in his characters and moral dimensions in the issues they struggled with. The phrase also suggests that Scott and James shared a parallel concern within the context of the history of the English novel--how a novel (and a novelist) could at the same time be faithful to life and yet be moral. Ultimately, as suggested by his discussion of George Sand, it appears that James occupied a middle ground between the traditional "English attitude," the openly moralistic position taken by Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett, and the glorification of love he found in George Sand. By inclining Strether, however, "to the service of honour and virtue," he may have acknowledged a deeper debt to Sir Walter Scott than has been commonly realized. Is it possible that in Henry James's first attachment, to Sir Walter Scott, there was a "virtuous attachment"?

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NOTES

¹ L. Moffitt Cecil, "'Virtuous Attachment' in James's *The Ambassadors*," *AQ*, XIX (Winter 1967), 719-724.

² Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York, 1964), p. 112.

³ *Ambassadors*, p. 330.

⁴ *Ambassadors*, p. 337.

⁵ Sir Walter Scott, "A Review of Emma," *Quarterly Review*, XIV (October 1815), 200. This essay is also reprinted in part in Lynn C. Bartlett and William R. Sherwood, eds., *The English Novel: Background Readings* (Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 120-129.

⁶ Henry James, "Preface," *The Princess Casamassima* (New York, 1908), p. xii.

⁷ Henry James, "Fiction and Sir Walter Scott," *Notes and Reviews by Henry James*, ed. Pierre de Chaignon la Rose (Freeport, N.Y., 1968), pp. 10-11. The essay was first entitled "Review of *Essays on Fiction*" and was published in the October 1864 issue of *The North American Review*. Cornelia Pulsifer Kelley, in *The Early Development of Henry James*, rev. ed. (Urbana, 1965), pp. 27-28, recognizes a potential contradiction in the essay. On the one hand, she notes, James clearly praises Scott for his pre-eminent ability to please and amuse the reader. On the other, she finds that the essay has "hints" and "suggestions" of what was to become the "key-note of James's reviews"--the position that "the novelist must instruct and instruct truly." After this essay, she observes, James immediately began to modify his thought in the direction of the more characteristic position.

⁸ Henry James, "George Sand," *The Galaxy*, 24 (July 1977), 54-55. The essay also appears, in revised form, in James's *French Poets and Novelists* (London, 1878). It is significant to note in this essay the association of the names of Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen. The association recurs frequently in James's criticism, usually when James lists major English novelists, and it should be kept in mind that the phrase, "virtuous attachment," first occurs in Scott's review of *Emma*.

⁹ "George Sand," p. 55.

¹⁰ "George Sand," p. 56.

¹¹ "George Sand," pp. 57-59.

¹² "George Sand," p. 61.

¹³ "George Sand," p. 61.

¹⁴ A statement to this effect occurs two years later, in 1879, in the concluding paragraph of James's *Hawthorne*.

He [Hawthorne] was not a moralist, and he was not simply a poet. The moralists are weightier, denser, richer, in a sense; the poets are more purely inconclusive and irresponsible. He combined in a singular degree the spontaneity of the imagination with a haunting care for moral problems. Man's conscience was his theme, but he saw it in the light of a creative fancy which added, out of its own substance, an interest, and, I may almost say, an importance.

Henry James, *Hawthorne* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1956), p. 145.

¹⁵ Scott, p. 189.