

The Extravagant Curve of the Globe:

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Refractions of Europe in Henry James's An  
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# "The Extravagant Curve of the Globe": Refractions of Europe in Henry James's "An International Episode" and *The Ambassadors*

By Roxana Pana-Oltean, *University of Bucharest*

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Eloquent of moral and imaginative geographies, James's picturesque spaces of travel seem to open up under the sign of what Strether in *The Ambassadors* calls "a great impression" (199), with the two poles of the international scene, Europe and America, the opposed ends of an imaginary transatlantic bridge. Receiving letters from America at the banker in Paris, Strether contemplates the coordinates of his distance from home:<sup>1</sup>

This morning there were letters [...] so that, after a controlled impulse to go into them in the reception room of the bank, which, reminding him of the post-office at Woollett, affected him as the abutment of some transatlantic bridge, he slipped into the pocket of his loose grey overcoat with a sense of the felicity of carrying them off. (110)

The Paris bank, however, also inscribes the city with refractions of home. Foreign spaces--Europe for Americans or, conversely, America for Europeans--engage the visitor in an intensely fictionalized relationship.<sup>2</sup> They invite the supplementation of reading and, in particular, of remembering: "We're all looking at each other--and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That's what the light of Paris seems always to know" (207). The two "abutments" of the transatlantic bridge are, in this sense, perceived as also marked by inescapable effects of a key resemblance, akin both to Malcolm Bradbury's transatlantic refraction<sup>3</sup> and a version of complex hybridization of the (m)otherland [End Page 180] theorized by Homi Bhabha. Thus James's picturesque Europe, experienced in the prototypical "An International Episode" with its "reverberations of greatness" (54), a "veritable museum of types" (63), is the object of a journey forking into theatrical performance<sup>4</sup> and memorial reconstruction,<sup>5</sup> an intensely desired foreign otherness unfolding as a version of what Evelyne Ender calls the "hysterical body" (6). The American--or, indeed, European--subject "at the mercy of picturesqueness," on the threshold of a "hyperreality" is, as Susan Griffin argues, the object of intense "visual manipulations" (34). Hallucinating foreignness is an effect of James's "extravagant curve of the globe." Mrs. Newsome's voice across the Atlantic Ocean reaches Strether as a distorted echo of home: "it came to him in time to save his manners that she could n't at the best become tactful as quickly as he. Her tact had to reckon with the Atlantic Ocean, the General Post-Office and the extravagant curve of the globe" (AM 183).

James's "extravagant curve of the globe" is a particularly significant distorting and reflective presence informing the assimilation of foreign space--a vast frontier inviting reading and translation--and, at the same time, the memory of the homeland, both taking shape as "orientalised,"<sup>6</sup> colonial, hysterical "others." Experienced through the always superfluous, "extravagant" mediation of literary,<sup>7</sup> pictorial,<sup>8</sup> and cultural<sup>9</sup> codes, both the mother country and the "other" country are, arguably, marked by (mis)interpretation and (mis)translation and are engaged in a complex relationship not only of difference but also of resemblance.

The particular interest of this essay is in the multiple translation effects traveling along the "extravagant curve of the globe," figuring and refiguring the foreign landscape, and in the phantomatic reverberations of the motherland shaping the experience and construction of foreign space. The paper is centered on two

texts particularly rich in modulations of the international theme, rereadable, arguably, from Kristeva's perspective of tales of love, as "amorous" narratives, with a "lover" of new worlds in focus (*Tales* 192-93). Thus in both the early "An International Episode" and the mature opus *The Ambassadors*, transatlantic representations subvert the overt dualities staged, as a current of criticism argues, by the two geographical and moral poles of Europe and America. If, in "An International Episode," the emphasis is on...

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