H. G. Wells: “I rewrite you, much, as I read – which is the highest tribute my damned impertinence can pay an author”. Mrs Osmond is a tribute to James in all sorts of ways – through allusions to James’s own life, for a start. After Isabel lunches with a newly invented feminist character, Miss Janeway, her hostess looks forward to that evening’s dinner with the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson, James’s real-life friend; Gilbert Osmond goes at one point to visit the real American composer Francis Boott – Boott being one of James’s models for Osmond’s own character; and James himself, unamed but identifiable, appears early on across a London hotel dining room, mysteriously watching Isabel. Reference to “an obscure hurt” glances at James’s later idiosyncrasies at times, and the style pastiches the 1908 edition of Portrait – the style pastiches James’s later idiosyncrasies at times, and the style pastiches. Banville has evidently struggled with the problem of whether to assume his readers will or won’t have a recent sense of Portrait, and he has played it rather safe. There is much recapping and overlapping, Isabel, who ends in James’s novel by setting off for Rome, though we only hear of her departure, is given in Banville’s version a whole to-do list: she takes the train, arrives at Paddington, goes to a hotel, has dinner, goes to a bank, has her lunch with Miss Janeway, tells her friend Henrietta about the conspiracy against her by Osmond and her false friend Madame Merle, and about Caspar Goodwood’s kiss “like white lightning”. We don’t actually breach the chronological border at the time, known as the New Woman” – which would have been unimaginably far from F. W. Murnau’s Nosferatu: “up on the driving seat, in the darkness of the rushing night, a wordless fiend rattled the reins and mercilessly plied the whip”. Sequels may tempt authors to resolve mysteries, settle scores, impose their own world view; they give an hors-texte chance to air the kind of questions about speculative or interpretative issues that animate reading groups. Banville’s Madame Merle asks Isabel about the central secret in Portrait (the fact that Pansy is Merle’s daughter): “Did you not know, all along? Surely you must have, if only at some unreachable level”. It is no said in James’s novel that Isabel has contemplated this possibility, but Banville’s version of her does not actually seem to allow Isabel the chance to strike an idealistic blow for romance, a couple of violent wrenches darken the picture here, in a way that some will doubt can tally with James. And some inventions seem to conflict with the narrative drive of the original: if Osmond has a well-connected old collector friend with English estates, “Lord Lanchester”, why was he so dazzled by Lord Warburton (who doesn’t reappear here)? Banville’s grasp of historical and cultural fact, though often impressive, can slip. James’s action, we can work out, ends in June 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that Osmond doesn’t work for a phrase not coined until 1877, so a reference to “that species, still rare until 1894; “suffragettes” did not exist by that name until 1906, the same year, coincidentally, that the OED records the first heterosexual use of “boyfriend”, which Banville also uses. An Italian hotel concierge addresses Isabel as “tu” – which would have been unimaginably familiar. Ralph Touchett is said to have
enjoyed “the fiery glare of the Roman sun” – in his mother’s house in Florence. Workmen take down Mr Osmond’s desk, which is to “down the hill to the Palazzo Roccacana” – as if that dismal pile has somehow moved to Florence from Rome, where it is correctly situated 210 pages earlier.

One might take issue, too, with Banville’s appearance and that of his protagonist’s dismissals of the importance of respectability in Anglo-American society in Italy. A newly cynical Mrs Touchett asks, “how many of Serena Merle’s acquaintances . . . do you imagine, would be shocked or even surprised to learn she was pregnant by your husband’s mistress – to mother to his child?” But Madame Merle and Osmond worship appearances: this is the same social world in which Daisy Miller is ostracized merely for flirting, and the penalties are real. They have transgressed in a way that endangers their social status. Our historical imagination perhaps needs to register this as a taboo comparable to those of today regarding sexual abuse or racist behaviour.

For the purposes of the “reckoning” towards which Banville’s Isabel moves in a veiled and revenge plot, she still has a kind of have, surprisingly, full control of the fortune for which the scheming Osmond married her. They apparently have a joint account, and it conveniently transpires (quite late) that Isabel’s astute lawyer has drawn up an advantageous pre-nup. This feels rather wishful. Would the manipulative, mercenary, patriarchal Osmond have let Isabel get off so lightly? James, with his modicum of legal training, was always aware of money. Banville’s Osmond worries that his wife will “abandon him and take her fortune” – as if that were easy. The break for freedom seems very straightforward: “Now our marriage is at an end, and I am taking the money back”. If his position is so weak, isn’t Osmond’s offensive behaviour here insanely self-serving?

But such quibbles perhaps miss the point – that Mrs Osmond, in all its realism, is a knowing fantasy. Banville’s highly self-reflexive novel knows that it is in some sense a shadow of another; and his Isabel, in entering the novel, has become a kind of ghost: “she had . . . the sense of having herself passed over an ultimate boundary, into some other bourne – that same social world in which Daisy Miller is ostracized merely for flirting, and the penalties are real. They have transgressed in a way that endangers their social status. Our historical imagination perhaps needs to register this as a taboo comparable to those of today regarding sexual abuse or racist behaviour.”

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