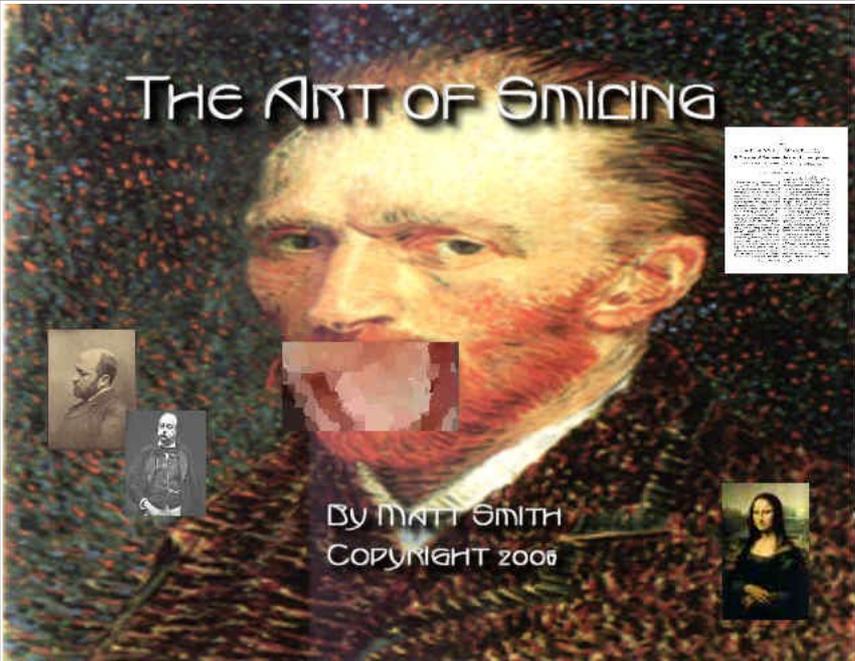


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In the chapter of his textbook *Psychology* treating human social behavior, Peter Gray, a Boston College professor, writes:

The emergence of language ... did not replace the already existing system of nonverbal communication but, rather, added a new layer of communication on top of it... For social interactions to meet the requirements of behavioral coordination and mutual beneficence, each individual must have clues about the intentions and desires of the others. For people ... nonverbal expressions of emotion are often the most reliable clues available (534).

Smiling, he continues, has proven to be the most reliable evidence of the social utility of nonverbal expression. A smile rarely crosses our lips unless we are interacting with others. As such, it is almost purely a form of communication, and because it provides reliable clues about our emotions, it is one of the most artless forms of communication. This artless form of communication precedes language. Gray seems to suggest that these two forms are layered, that the two exist on separate planes. This begs the question of whether there is a tangible interface between the two, and if so, what happens there?

Let's consider Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* as such an interface. In the novel, language seems to make a claim on its ancestral form of communication through its treatment of smiling. Gray's assertion that smiles are the most explicitly social form of nonverbal expression, which provides 'the most reliable clues available,' seems to support the notion that smiles reveal our truest selves.

The notion also has support in *Madame Bovary*, when Flaubert writes: “the irresistible smile she felt coming to her lips” (217).

Flaubert seems to rely on the same notion. Not only does he suggest that the smile is ‘irresistible,’ or involuntary, but that the smile is not just a concern of the lips. Rather, Emma feels the smile ‘coming to her lips,’ that is, the smile comes from elsewhere—presumably from within her. Smiles rise from within us and bring to the surface our true emotions. As if it one time experienced a fall, language has long posed the problem of disingenuousness. Freudian slips might be the closest that language comes to reclaiming that lost ingenuousness. With the advent of language, if smiles were supplantable as a reliable form of communication, one would think they would become extinct. As Gray points out, smiles, among other nonverbal expressions, are distinct from language. It seems likely that the smile has not become extinct and still remains distinct from language due to its knack for ingenuousness. Then it makes some intuitive sense that for language, an unreliable form of communication, to make a claim on an artless one, language must necessarily make an art of it.

In one diabolical sentence, all that we take for granted in a smile seems to unravel: “Madame Merle gave a bright, voluntary smile” (459).

‘Give’ connotes handling, transacting, exchanging. The word suggests that the smile is a sort of currency. But like any currency, it would further suggest that the smile can be inflated, debased, or even disused. Giving also goes hand-in-hand with volition. As soon as the smile crosses the line between voluntary and involuntary, it loses its reliability for ingenuousness. As soon as the smile loses its reliability for ingenuousness, it depreciates.

In so doing, the novel makes us question the act of smiling. If we have to consider disingenuousness as a possibility, we have to consider the motive behind the smile. The novel, then, forces us to ask the question, ‘Why is he/she smiling?’ This question injects an ambiguity, and it seems unnatural when a smile is normally reliable. Perhaps this explains the allure of the *Mona Lisa*. The question that burns in our minds when we look at her portrait is, ‘Why is she smiling?’ Her smile is inscrutable. Her eyes look slightly askance, just enough to suggest that the reason lies just to your right. Oh, but if we could swivel the canvas and discover that reason! This is da Vinci’s claim on the smile. The novel’s claim is the claim of language on nonverbal expression. Instead of reclaiming lost ingenuousness, the novel makes an art of smiling.

Isabel arrives at Gardencourt ingenuous, looking for a bit

of fresh air. She ends up giving Gardencourt the fresh air it has been waiting for, breathing a little life into the desultory place. Not long after her aunt ferries her away from her homebound atrophy, a remnant of home catches up to her. It is Caspar Goodwood, and despite this unwelcome reminder of the tired life she's left, she remains benevolent: "'That's a beautiful sophism,' said the girl with a smile more beautiful still" (214).

The question here is whether "more beautiful still" is the narrator's facetiousness or admiration. It seems to be narratorial admiration that her smile is genuine. In response to Caspar's next application she replies 'with much spirit,' which only seems to reinforce her ingenuousness. Further down the page, there is no question that she is absolved of any ill will: "There was something passionately positive in the tone in which she gave him this advice, and he saw a shining candour in her eyes that helped him to believe her" (218).

What makes this sentence such a compelling case for Isabel's ingenuousness is that it synthesizes two points of view, namely, those of the narrator and of Caspar. Just as mixing tin and copper makes bronze, alloying these two voices lends language reliability. 'There was something' may suggest a lack of knowledge that the narrator might be loathe to admit. Even then, the real starlet of ingenuousness is 'a shining candour,' Caspar's invention. It is not 'something.' He does not just believe her because it is Isabel's. Caspar would probably need a good deal of something to convince him after she absconded so abruptly. But it is some thing specific that makes him a believer: 'a shining candour'. We ourselves can nearly see the fleeting sparkle in her eye that surely for Caspar carries the wealth of meaning that comes with intimacy. What is important here is that Caspar believes in her good faith. We would have to think him duped in order for Isabel not to seem ingenuous here. And if Caspar, likely the person who knows her best out of any character we've met so far, is actually being duped, then the narrator must be playing a cunning trick and we shouldn't have any shame in being duped as well. But we canny readers may think that 'a smile more beautiful still' is suspiciously trite, that it even insinuates some ill will on the part of Isabel. Rather, it seems to be a calculated triteness that does not suggest ill will, but one that leaves open the possibility for the narrator to engineer the reversal later on.

This is not to say that Isabel's smile is warm and cheery at all times. What seems to be true, however, is her sensitivity to the delicacy of the smile. While she does use her smile as a façade, finding herself affronted by overeager suitors such as Lord Warburton, she is aware of the effect on the smile: "'[Henrietta]'d never approve of it,' said Isabel, trying to smile and take advantage of this

side-issue; despising herself too, not a little, for doing so” (187).

To discover the force of the sentence, we need to discern what precisely she is despising herself for. Is it for trying to smile? Or for taking advantage? Or both? The crucial word to decipher in answering this question is ‘and’. The word can differ subtly among several meanings. There are two that are more common; they suggest either simultaneity or ‘in addition to’. But neither of these readings of ‘and’ resolves the question of what she despises. A third meaning of ‘and’ does. This subtler meaning is more powerful than the other two because it suggests a relationship between the words it connects beyond happenstance. Here, that relationship might be causal. Read: ‘Isabel, trying to smile *in order to* take advantage’. If we read ‘and’ in this light, Isabel is despising herself for trying to use the smile as a deception. So even though her smile is not wholly ingenuous, she knows the unspoken code of smiling that she is trying to break. What’s more, she demonstrates a visceral repulsion from the art of smiling.

Then Madame Merle enters the picture. Isabel’s smile becomes tainted. It takes on an ambiguity that forces us to ask, ‘Why is she smiling?’ While visiting Ralph before he leaves Rome for good, she uses a smile reminiscent of Madame Merle in that it cuts to the quick:

“Isabel went to see him at the last, and he made the same remark that Henrietta had made. It struck him that Isabel was uncommonly glad to get rid of them all [Ralph, Henrietta, Caspar]. For all answer to this she gently laid her hand on his, and said in a low tone, with a quick smile: ‘My dear Ralph—!’ It was answer enough, and he was quite contented” (549).

When Isabel smiles “a smile more beautiful still,” (214) her smile is but a signal of goodwill. Her smile here is laden with much more meaning. That meaning is contained in that strange dash. If there were no exclamation point to bring the dash to a halt, we would think she was cut off by a sudden novel idea or by some interruption. Nor can we simply read this as an exclamation of surprise or shock, that meddlesome dash cannot be ignored. The smile must bear enormous meaning. For Ralph to accuse her of being happy to see him leave and then be satisfied by a measly three-word explanation is suspect. The unspoken explanation that simply must have been transmitted is wrapped up in her ‘quick smile’. There simply has to be something to convey all the missing meaning, and that oddly placed dash seems to be where that meaning is hidden.

Even beyond chocking her smile with significant ambiguity, Isabel uses it to deny Ralph as well. Above, Ralph is, albeit strangely, appeased. But in this previous

exchange with him Isabel uses the smile as a resource for deception:

It was the first time she  
had alluded to the need  
for help, and the words  
shook her cousin with  
their violence. He gave  
a long murmur of relief,  
of pity, of tenderness; it  
seemed to him that at  
last the gulf between  
them had been bridged.  
It was this that made  
him exclaim in a  
moment: 'How unhappy  
you must be!'

He had no sooner  
spoken than she  
recovered her self-  
possession, and the first  
use she made of it was  
to pretend she had not  
heard him. 'When I talk  
of your helping me I  
talk great nonsense,' she  
said with a quick smile  
(513) .

It is a remarkable occasion, that Isabel lets slip even a mere allusion to what might be her faltering independence. That her words have a 'violence' to them spells out the significance of Isabel betraying a chink in her armor. When Ralph speaks, he cannot help but reveal to her that he has seen deeper than she is wont to allow. As if on cue, Isabel, having grown into a true Mrs Osmond in that she rarely forgets herself, remembers herself. She smiles and denies Ralph this revelation, blotting out the bridge with a quick smile. Zeus has thunderbolts, Isabel smiles. Her smile is the keeper of her self-possession. As soon as she finishes forgetting herself, she bolts a smile to her lips to reinforce her unassailability. She does not despise herself for it. She either no longer recognizes its despicability or has quite grown to appreciate the cold efficiency of a really well placed smile.

It would seem that Isabel has learned this cold efficiency from Madame Merle: "The lady smiled and discriminated. 'I'm afraid there are moments in life when even Schubert has nothing to say to us. We must admit, however, that they are our worst'" (224).

We run into our little friend, 'and,' again! And again 'and' seems to suggest a relationship other than happenstance. Beneath her smile, she discriminates. As unsettling as discrimination's debasement of the smile may seem, it is difficult to pinpoint why this is. Her words are unreliable,

in that they gloss over the tremendous amount of work that the first sentence does. Its pithiness leaves us curious, and suspicious. The cold efficiency is that the transition between epochs rests upon this sentence's back. Neither Isabel nor we canny readers, upon first meeting Madame Merle, can possibly recognize what new stage these packed words usher in.

But the layering of meaning of the disingenuous smile culminates in Madame Merle—just after Isabel realizes the sleight Madame Merle has played with her large, unjeweled hands—when the two meet unexpectedly in a momentous passage:

But she [Madame Merle] was different from usual; she came in slowly, behind the portress, and Isabel instantly perceived that she was not likely to depend upon her habitual resources. For her too the occasion was exceptional, and she had undertaken to treat it by the light of the moment. This gave her a peculiar gravity; she pretended not even to smile, and though Isabel saw that she was more than ever playing a part it seemed to her that on the whole the wonderful woman had never been so natural (596).

This is a first, that Isabel and we see Madame Merle in perfect candor. Isabel notices that she is 'different from usual'. Just as we asked earlier what makes Caspar believe in Isabel, we should now ask what is it that Isabel notices that makes Madame Merle different. The best clue we have is that 'she pretended not even to smile,' which consists of several layers of noticing that need unraveling. Isabel does not notice merely that 'she smiled,' nor does she merely notice that 'she pretended not to smile'; there are at least three layers of noticing, the last of which is 'not even'. The primary layer of noticing, 'she did not smile,' is remarkable in itself. It reveals that Isabel has become aware that Madame Merle is rarely not smiling. This small change makes Madame Merle wholly different, it would seem, since her identity seems wrapped up in the left corner of her mouth. The second layer of noticing, 'she pretended not to smile,' suggests that Isabel has become aware that Madame Merle's smiles are laced with deceit. Isabel sees that Madame Merle must make a conscious effort to be candid. If she were in fact candid when she smiled, Isabel would not have noticed beyond the primary layer. The conscious effort Madame Merle musters not to smile is her relinquishing 'her habitual resources.' While Isabel does not herself make the connection, it is readily apparent to us canny readers that these smiles are not smiles that come

from within, but smiles that are resources. The crowning layer, 'not even,' is Isabel's surprise. For the first time, even though it has been used time and again, this inconspicuous detail is given significance. That Madame Merle's conscious check of her deceit surprises Isabel implies that Isabel has not only become aware but has come to expect not to rely on that sullied smirk. And these three levels of noticing do more than suggest that Isabel has become aware of Madame Merle's art of smiling—they make us painfully aware of Madame Merle's smirching the smile. That she seems to Isabel to be most natural when she is playing a part certainly drives home her awareness of Madame Merle's deceit in general, but the subtle point is that Isabel noticing that 'she pretended not even to smile' has forged a powerful 'and' between smirk and smirch. Now that we have unveiled the practitioner and pliant apprentice of the art of smiling, what would complete the picture is an untouched smile, that is, a smile that remains distinctly and artlessly human throughout the novel. There does not seem to be an ingenuous smile that is preserved over the arc of the novel. Perhaps it is impossible to sustain within the bourgeois world. There does, however, seem to be such a smile at the beginning of the novel:

He had a narrow, clean-shaven face, with features evenly distributed and an expression of placid acuteness. It was evidently a face in which the range of representation was not large, so that the air of contented shrewdness was all the more of a merit. It seemed to tell that he had been successful in life, yet it seemed to tell also that his success had not been exclusive and invidious, but had had much of the inoffensiveness of failure. He had certainly had a great experience of men, but there was an almost rustic simplicity in the faint smile that played upon his lean, spacious cheek and lighted up his humorous eye as he at last slowly and carefully deposited his big teacup upon the table (61).

The narrator takes a long, hard look at Mr Touchett's face as he very simply returns his teacup to the table. Mr Touchett's simplicity preserves him as an uncorrupted individual. He has been able to become successful in England, to learn the English mannerisms, all the while staying American, bred, tried, and true. His smile is a token of that unthumbbed 'rustic simplicity.' He may even act as ballast for the novel insofar as he is a vessel uncompromised. Even though we see in his lifespan the

beginnings of conflict in the applications of Caspar and Lord Warburton and the brashness of Henrietta, once he passes on, these manageable problems pitch and heave until they subsume his faded simplicity. This is certainly a grand claim, maybe too grand a claim, to speak of Mr Touchett as the novel's center. Regardless, his passing is a powerful juncture. And if it is too grand to claim that Mr Touchett's passing unleashes the conflicts, at least Isabel seems to find smooth sailing in his presence. Her smile, especially, seems to have a pure quality under the ruddy sky of Mr Touchett's setting smile:

'Are you talking about Mrs Touchett?' the old man called out from his chair. 'Come here, my dear, and tell me about her. I'm always thankful for information.'

The girl hesitated again, smiling. 'She's really very benevolent,' she answered; after which she went over to her uncle, whose mirth was excited by her words.

Lord Warburton was left standing with Ralph... (74)

She smiles, relieved to retreat from the overly intrigued gentlemen, who couse use a leash in when female company's over. Mr Touchett remains her sanctuary, in which Isabel smiles her first and most composed smile of the novel:

She had seated herself and had put away the little dog; her white hands, in her lap, were folded upon her black dress; her head was erect her eye lighted, her flexible figure turned itself easily this way and that, in sympathy with the alertness with which she evidently caught impressions. Her impressions were numerous, and they were all reflected in a clear, still smile. 'I've never seen anything so beautiful as this' (72).

The description is guarded on either side by Mr Touchett's genial conversation. This is, if ever the novel was painting a picture, Isabel's portrait. Mr Touchett's 'faint smile' is the novel's first. It is telling that the original bearer of this smile is the first to fade. Rather, the smile is driven off, and by none other than the invidious Madame Merle: The lady smiled and discriminated (224).

We run into our little friend again. This time, to understand

what it is that she discriminates. The answer lies in what Isabel says to the lady just prior to this. Madame Merle has just stopped strumming the piano. Isabel and she are left alone as their hosts tend to the fading Mr Touchett: 'I hope my uncle's doing well,' Isabel added. 'I should think that to hear such lovely music as that would really make him feel better.' The lady smiled and discriminated (224).

The lady discriminates because she knows that if Mr Touchett were to hear her playing, he would be undone. At least symbolically, her arrival at Gardencourt might be the very cause of his death. And the lady smiles because she knows that Isabel has no idea. From the start, Madame Merle's smile is tied by the insistent conjunction 'and' to ulterior motive. And as Mr Touchett disappears from the novel, taking his smile along with him, Madame Merle wastes no time seizing her opportunity to fill the vacancy. As one pair of guiding hands passes her on, another seamlessly picks up what the other left off. The transition, the transaction of epochs, is so smooth, however, that it sneaks by. Isabel, for one, misses it. Thereafter, she bends to Madame Merle's handling. But perhaps the ultimate supplanting of Mr Touchett's smile comes later in the novel when Madame Merle is ensuring Mr Rosier's failure with Osmond: Madame Merle dropped her eyes; she had a faint smile. 'He's a gentleman, he has a charming temper; and, after all, an income of forty thousand francs' (424)!

Insidiously conniving, she exacts her price. She claims and perverts the faded smile. She simply looks down and suddenly *has* Mr Touchett's smile. It is as if she looks down, reaches into her pocket, and comes out with Mr Touchett's smile in hand. All this seems to transpire within the space of the semicolon. She looks down and *voilà!* She has his smile. Madame Merle plucks from the novel's forbidden tree the one unthumbed smile and spoils it.

On a certain level, the novel is making a claim on lost ingenuousness. Because of the dominance of Madame Merle's brand of smile, the prospect of this reclamation is dismal. But in making a claim on smiling, language could not help making an art of it. The novel cannot avoid its unreliability as it dips into the plane of nonverbal expression. Language has at least this homage to do its forebear. But there does seem to be a refuge amid the chiaroscuro: Isabel's 'clear, still smile' (72). Clear in its meaning, still in the constancy of its reliability—what we trust a smile to be. Why is she smiling? For in this moment the answer to Mr Touchett's question, 'I don't know that I understand what you mean by behaving picturesquely,' is manifest in Isabel in propria persona.

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