

Can Strether Step Into the Same River Twice? *The Ambassadors* as Meta-novel

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It may seem a little late in the day, if not *de trop*, to presume to defend Henry James against the strictures levelled at him by E. M. Forster more than half a century ago at Cambridge. But Forster's essential misreading of James has recently resurfaced, in the 1980 Northcliffe Lectures which James's compatriot, Mary McCarthy, delivered at University College, London. If two such distinguished writers can so egregiously misconstrue the Master, then perhaps a Defence of Prose may be timely.

Forster regards *The Ambassadors* as a "rigid" book, in which we see "pattern triumphant", and we also see "the sacrifices an author must make if he wants his pattern and nothing else to triumph." Forster then develops his suggestive "hourglass" analogy to define the pattern of *The Ambassadors* and the reversal of its plot. But Forster is not content to categorize; he must also decry what he describes. He laments the "sacrifice" that the "beauty" of the "pattern" necessitates. Thus, "most of human life has to disappear before he [James] can do us a novel." This "drastic curtailment" or, as James might have put it, with his tongue in his cheek, "terrible denudation", of the numbers of human beings and of their attributes is, Forster urges, in the interest of the pattern. Thus, "a pattern must emerge, and anything that emerged from the pattern must be pruned off as wanton distraction. Who so wanton as human beings? . . . And this castrating is not in the interests of the Kingdom of Heaven, . . . it is for the sake of a particular aesthetic effect which is certainly gained, but at this heavy price."¹

Mary McCarthy finds in James a comparable denudation, holding James solely responsible for the demise of Ideas in the Novel. Taking T. S. Eliot's 1918 observation that James "had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it" as a point of departure, Miss McCarthy distinguishes between James, on the one hand, and Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy, and Dostoevski on the other. In James (or, it might be insisted, in Eliot's James), she says, we find implicit "the snubbing notion, radical at the time but by now canon

1 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 154, 155, 161, 162, 163.

doctrine, of the novel as a fine art and of the novelist as an intelligence superior to mere intellect. . . . The power of the novelist insofar as he was a supreme intelligence was to free himself from the workload of commentary and simply, awesomely, to show: his creation was beyond paraphrase or reduction."²

Miss McCarthy itemizes what is excluded from a James novel—suspense, physical action, inventory, description of places and persons, moral teaching; battles, riots, tempests, sunrises, the sewers of Paris, crime, hunger, the plague, the scaffold, the clergy; and, most importantly, Ideas. Ideas about politics, particularly, but also, curiously, about art. After this drastic curtailment, she concludes, in terms recalling Forster's strictures, that "the novelist's concern must be to save the particulars at all costs, even at the sacrifice of the perfection of the design. An idea cannot have loose ends, but a novel, I almost think, needs them" (p. 117). Miss McCarthy's account of James's exclusion of ideas about art (she has, surely too exclusively, the *visual* arts in mind) is couched in these terms: "James took the risk—after all, it was his own great interest—and he actually dared make it the ruling passion of several of his figures, at the price, however, of treating it always by indirection, as a motive but never as a topic in itself. If you think of Proust, you will see the difference" (p. 10).

In both Forster and McCarthy we find a condemnation of James derived from an accusation that, in his obsession with form, he is guilty of dehumanizing the novel. "He etherialized the novel beyond its wildest dreams and perhaps etherized it as well."³ James is thus deemed guilty of the over-determination of character in the interests of pattern, or shape, or structure, or form. He is guilty not only of the aestheticizing of experience; he is also guilty of being *unaware* that he is guilty thereof. It is tempting to dismiss Forster and McCarthy as crude readers who turn a congeries of contingent assumptions about the novel into a set of necessary ones, and pay their accusations no more heed. But this would hardly do justice to what James has in fact accomplished; it would fail to draw attention to the complexity of James's attitudes to art, to the aestheticizing of experience, and to the limitations, as well as the prodigiousness, of the Novel.

A salutary corrective to the Forster/McCarthy misreading is found in Bernard Richards' essay, "*The Ambassadors and The*

2 Mary McCarthy, *Ideas and the Novel* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), pp. 3-4.

3 McCarthy, p. 6.

Sacred Fount: the artist manqué". Richards acknowledges the issues of art, form, dehumanization, and over-determination, but convincingly demonstrates that James was aware of these issues, deploying them ironically and critically in *The Ambassadors*, with respect to Strether *qua* character. Thus Strether "has lived a life too inward, and too nurtured on art. Art has helped prepare him for Europe, as it prepared Isabel Archer and other of James's characters, but Strether is less self critical of this aspect of himself than most of the others."⁴ Thus Strether "wants to *know* about life before he commits himself to living it, but he does not want to find out either by participating or by snooping in key-holes. He wants to find out in the discreet and much more artistically satisfying way of *watching* the people who indulge in social intercourse, and *guessing* from gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice what kind of people they are" (p. 226). Richards very properly reminds us that in his *Notebooks* James played with the idea of making Strether a novelist. Richards then makes this crucial observation:

I said earlier that timidity rather than an irrepressible aesthetic instinct was probably the mainspring of Strether's character, but it would be unfair to deny entirely a well-developed aesthetic sense in Strether. His responses to Paris and the French countryside are those of an especially sensitive and visually trained man. Many of the perceptions attributed to him are almost indistinguishable from James's own travel writings. There is, however, an undercurrent of a rather sinister kind—that Strether both subverts artistic productions for the basis of his own wayward romancing, and uses the patterns of art as a convenient paradigm for the patterns of life. He is often searching in life for the regularity and predictability which one finds in works of art. It is when he finds life consonant with art that he can feel most secure and in control. Life for him is something that can be poured into moulds, or fitted into a neat form—a square frame for America and an oblong frame for Europe. His alarm grows when life threatens to overflow the moulds or break out of the frame. (p. 232)

The Richards reading and the Forster/McCarthy reading of James are, it seems, mutually exclusive. I wish to endorse Richards' reading, and extend it. Quite contrary to the Forster/McCarthy reading, I will argue that James's novel *The Ambassadors* (a typical late-Jamesian novel) contains a meta-novel, and that that meta-novel constitutes a critique of the very shaping, artistic, fictionalizing, activities which are (as Forster and Mc-

4 Bernard Richards, "*The Ambassadors and The Sacred Fount: the artist manqué*", in *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, ed. John Goode (London: Methuen & Co., 1972), p. 225.

Carthy observe) the essence of the Jamesian novel as such. To put it another way, the meta-novel exists in the paradoxical relation between the Richards reading, on the one hand, and the Forster/McCarthy reading, on the other. A colleague whose judgement I very much respect has said that she finds *The Ambassadors* less satisfying than, say, *The Wings of the Dove*, because once one has cracked Strether's role and his inadequacies, then the novel is relatively simple—a moral detective story. Because there is no such simple and single point of reference as Strether in *The Wings of the Dove*, she maintains, that novel is more complex and more satisfying. But, if we accept my notion of a paradoxical meta-novel which asks such questions as, "What is a novel?", "What does it mean to give a shape to experience?", then we concentrate not only on James's, but also on Strether's, shaping activities, and on the (in)adequacies and (im)proprieties of such activities. And, under such scrutiny, the novel is deeply problematic, in a way that a mere moral detective story might not be. Seen in this light *The Ambassadors*, composed between 1900 and 1901, is once again⁵ the initiating twentieth-century novel par excellence. Like so many of its successors—Ford, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, for example—it is a work of fiction deeply concerned, both aesthetically and morally, with and about the nature (aesthetic and moral) of the human activity of writing fictions.

James, it hardly needs to be said, is distinguished not only as a novelist, but also as a theorist of fiction. His "Prefaces" are a monument to the attention he devoted to the aesthetic and moral implications of presuming to give a shape to experience, albeit in "the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms."⁶ In the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, James insists on the necessity of framing, of giving form to fiction, and insists, by implication, on the distinction between art and life.

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. (p. 5)

(James's italicizing is crucial.) The image of a circular structure as an object of aesthetic admiration recurs in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*.

- 5 Cf. Leon Edel's "Introduction" to the Bodley Head edition of *The Ambassadors* (London, 1970), p. 10.
- 6 Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (1909; repr. New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1962), p. 326. The following quotations from the prefaces are from this volume.

Such is the aspect that to-day "The Portrait" wears for me: a structure reared with an "architectural" competence, as Turgenieff would have said, that makes it, to the author's own sense, the most proportioned of his productions after "The Ambassadors"—which was to follow it so many years later and which has, no doubt, a superior roundness. (p. 52)

James can, at times, as in the preface to *The American*, strike a Nabokovian note in his insistence on the *consonantia* of the work of art.

The content and the "importance" of a work of art are in fine wholly dependent on its *being* one: outside of which all prate of its representative character, its meaning and its bearing, its morality and humanity, are an impudent thing. (p. 38)

Which utterance can, I suggest, afford fuel for a Forster/McCarthy fire only if it is read without regard to the complexity of its position: the "prate" is not irrelevant, but secondary and dependent. It is this "dependence" of the secondary qualities that permits James, in the preface to *The Tragic Muse*, to be dismissive, *as an artist*, of the "large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary", and to oppose to them his "delight in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form", and to "go in" for complete pictorial fusion' (pp. 84, 85).

At the centre of the Jamesian circle, as he informs us in the preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, is a perceiving consciousness, who may be "the most polished of possible mirrors", or, in the case of Lambert Strether, "a mirror verily of miraculous silver" (p. 70). What all these persons have in common is that they are "intense perceivers" (p. 71); and perception is an activity that involves selection and rejection; or, to put it another way, perception involves a conceptual framing. Experience is shaped in order to be experienced. Thus James insists, in his preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, that

Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard, latent *value* with which alone it is concerned, sniffs round the mass as instinctively as a dog suspicious of some buried bone. . . . Life has no direct sense whatever for the subject and is capable, luckily for us, of nothing but splendid waste. Hence the opportunity for the sublime economy of art, which rescues, which saves, and hoards and "banks", investing and reinvesting these fruits of toil in wondrous useful "works" and thus making up for us, desperate spendthrifts that we all naturally are, the most princely of incomes. (p. 120)

James affords the reader, on his next page, an instance from the life of the necessity for the (Jamesian) artist to "draw by a

geometry of his own, [his] circle". For the friend, who is all unwittingly affording him the seed from which the *Spoils* will organically grow, proceeds, "life being all inclusion and confusion", to afford him *too much information*. The seed will need to be "transplanted to richer soil", for what we have seen is "clumsy Life again at her stupid work" (p. 121). Now, Forster and McCarthy might well regard these sentiments as a crowning instance of Jamesian *hubris*, but it is not so. James is making a necessary aesthetic discrimination between Life and Art; that he is all too aware that such aesthetic discriminations imply moral distinctions *The Ambassadors*, as subsequent analysis will show, bears eloquent witness. It must be insisted that James, as novelist, was not operating within the sphere of "life", but within the confines of sentences, and that the shape of these sentences created the ironizing of the life on which Henry James was, like a mirror of miraculous silver, reflecting.⁷

This, to put it yet another way, is precisely where we may locate the distinction between James's "Project" (1900) for *The Ambassadors*⁸ and his "Preface" (c. 1909) to it. In the former, the concern is principally with plot, with its intricacies, balances, contrasts, and inevitabilities; there is little reference to artistic technique, though the terms "dramatic" and "pictorial" recur. But, if in the "Project" the focus is on the plot and the story, then in the "Preface" the emphasis is on the delight of *telling* the story. It is a paradigm of narrative *jouissance*,⁹ a celebration of the storyteller's art, where excitement is expressed and communicated through an efflorescence of similes, an explosion of metaphor.

These constituents clustered and combined to give me further support, to give me what I may call the note absolute. There it stands, accordingly, full in the tideway; driven in, with hand taps, like some strong stake for the noose of a cable, the swirl of the current round-about it. What amplified the hint to more than the bulk of hints in general was the gift with it of the old Paris garden, for in that token were sealed up values infinitely precious. There was of course the seal to break and each item of the packet to count over and handle and estimate . . .¹⁰

- 7 Cf. William H. Gass, "In the Cage", "The High Brutality of Good Intentions", in his *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), pp. 164-90.
- 8 Included in *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Muir (1947; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, Galaxy Book, 1961), pp. 370-415.
- 9 Cf. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976).
- 10 Preface to *The Ambassadors*, in *The Art of the Novel*, p. 309.

To those of a Forster-McCarthy persuasion who regard James's radical discontinuity between Life and Art with a kind of moral outrage it can now be asserted—there are no metaphors in Nature.

Sympathetic readers have noted the metaphoricity not only of James's language,¹¹ but also of his plots and his narrators. Thus, "the tendency of the late fictions is towards symbolic equivalents of the designing act of composition itself", and, in *The Golden Bowl*, the pagoda "as a metaphor . . . finally exhibits itself in its demonic, unattached concreteness—the *symboliste* construction squatting at the heart of the novel, waiting to be redeemed by bodily and mental suffering." It may be asked whether, in the late Jamesian world, the novel "hasn't ceased to exist . . . and become instead the conversation of intent commentators, practically creating what they annotate?"¹² The only shortcoming of this otherwise acute observation is that it regrettably restricts the scope of that prodigious term, "the novel".

In his postscript to his 1900 "Project" for *The Ambassadors*, James employs a similitude to describe his ten or twelve "Parts" that might afford Mary McCarthy support for her over-insistence on the place of ideas (or lack thereof) about the visual arts in James's work: ". . . each very full, as it were, and charged, like a rounded medallion, in a series of a dozen, hung, with its effects of high relief, on a wall."¹³ Medallion sequences are, of course, objects to be "read", often as allegorical narrative,¹⁴ so the analogy is pertinent. But it must also be stressed that as a connoisseur Henry James would "read" such a sequence critically. We have no *a priori* right to expect him to be any less critical of his own ten or twelve medallions, or "Books", with their constituent chapters. That James acknowledged, in a letter to Jocelyn Persse, that in "the poor old hero . . . you will perhaps find a resemblance

11 Consider, for example, James's revisions of *What Maisie Knew*. "With her great hard eyes on him she smiled . . ." (1st English edition) becomes "She directed to him the face that was like an illuminated garden, turnstile and all, for the frequentation of which he had his season ticket . . ." (New York edition). *What Maisie Knew* (1897; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 270.

12 Gabriel Pearson, "The Novel to End All Novels: *The Golden Bowl*", in Goode, *The Air of Reality*, pp. 307, 343, 326.

13 *Notebooks*, p. 415.

14 See, for example, Frances A. Yates's "reading" of the medallions in the "Sieve" portrait of Queen Elizabeth I in her *Astraea: the Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 114-20 and plates 16b, 17a, 17b.

(though not facial) to yours always Henry James",¹⁵ in no way mitigates an assertion that James's stance to Strether, as to art and the novel, and to the art of the novel, is essentially critical. Such a connoisseur of aesthetic and moral subtleties could hardly be expected to be otherwise. Before we make too much of Strether's "vague resemblance", we would do well to remember Nabokov's cautionary remarks to his students à propos of Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

One thing should be firmly impressed upon your minds: the work is not an autobiography; the narrator is not Proust the person, and the characters never existed except in the author's mind. Let us not, therefore, go into the author's life. It is of no importance in the present case and would only cloud the issue, especially as the author and the narrator do resemble each other in various ways and move in much the same environment.¹⁶

With these salutary remarks in mind, let us proceed to an examination of *The Ambassadors*, to its concern with the aestheticizing of experience, and to the role of Lewis Lambert Strether as an object of James's critical connoisseurship, both aesthetic and moral.

Our friend [Strether] continued to feel rather smothered in flowers, though he made in his other moments the almost angry inference that this was only because of his odious ascetic suspicion of any form of beauty. He periodically assured himself—for his reactions were sharp—that he shouldn't reach the truth of anything till he had at least got rid of that.¹⁷

This vision of Strether, by the narrator-over-his-shoulder, coming one-third of the way through the novel (it concludes the first paragraph of Book Fifth), may well be pivotal for the narrative of Strether's moral-aesthetic *bildung*. After this utterance, there are any number of textual indications (there have, I concede, been others before—but perhaps not in such profusion or of so extended a quality) that he has got rid of that "odious ascetic suspicion", but there is no assurance that this is a change for the better. New England asceticism may possess virtues that European aestheticism could benefit from. With increasing frequency and in passages of increasing density of relevant imagery, Strether

15 Henry James, *The Ambassadors: an Authoritative Text; the Author on the Novel; Criticism*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1964), p. 408.

16 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), p. 208.

17 Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (1903; repr. London: The Bodley Head Henry James, 1970), p. 165. All subsequent references are to this edition.

sees the world and his fellow characters through the medium of art. Thus, of Jeanne de Vionnet: "What was in the girl was indeed too soft, too unknown for direct dealing; so that one could only gaze at it as at a picture, quite staying one's own hand" (p. 187). Again, "She was fairly beautiful to him—a faint pastel in an oval frame: he thought of her already as of some lurking image in a long gallery, the portrait of a small old-time princess of whom nothing was known but that she had died young. Little Jeanne wasn't, doubtless, to die young, but one couldn't, all the same, bear on her lightly enough" (pp. 213-14). Whether the ironic qualification in the second sentence is Strether's, or the narrator's, is open to debate, and is possibly irresolvable; what is certain is that Strether's "framing" of experience will continue apace. In a paragraph rich with allusive analogies, Jeanne's mother, who will climax as Cleopatra in Strether's conceit, is seen thus: "Her head, extremely fair and exquisitely festal, was like a happy fancy, a notion of the antique, of an old precious medal, some silver coin of the Renaissance" (p. 222). Miss Barrace suggests "more than ever for her fellow guest the old French print, the historic portrait" (p. 358). Indeed, Strether's moral life becomes a sort of museum-going: "Between nine and ten, at last, in the high clear picture—he was moving in these days, as in a gallery, from clever canvas to clever canvas" (p. 430).

Strether does not restrict the sources of his "framing" of experience to the visual arts. Narrative and drama also play their parts. In a paradigmatic sequence Strether, having a few days before purchased Victor Hugo in seventy bound volumes ("a miracle of cheapness"), finds himself yet again in *Notre Dame* which, though it has "no direct voice for his soul" (p. 236) does provide an ambience, a stage-setting as it were, for an encounter which "deeply stirred his imagination" (p. 237). Here he observes a woman—of course, it is Madame de Vionnet; "of course" by virtue of the laws of composition, the ironies of drama, the necessities of narration—and observes her in a symptomatic fashion. "She reminded our friend—since it was the way of nine-tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined—of some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written" (p. 238). Then Strether, "again in the museum mood, was trying with head thrown back and eyes aloft, to reconstitute a past, to reduce it in fact to the convenient terms of Victor Hugo. . . . He looked,

doubtless, while he played his eternal nippers over Gothic glooms, sufficiently rapt in reverence" (p. 238). It seems a salutary corrective to Forster's denigration of James's necessary "sacrifices" to insist that it is *Strether* who "wants his pattern and nothing else to triumph". It is *Strether* who endeavours, here and elsewhere, to reduce, to reconstitute, through the "frames" of art, or the frames of those "eternal nippers", emblem of limited perception, the ambience of Hugo. Thus Madame de Vionnet is "romantic for him beyond what she could have guessed" (p. 240), and thus, as a consequence of his Victorious romanticizing, one pre-determining frame among many, he *misreads* Madame de Vionnet. "Unassailably innocent was a relation that could make one of the parties to it so carry herself. If it wasn't innocent why did she haunt the churches?—into which, given the woman he could believe he made out, she would never have come to flaunt an insolence of guilt" (p. 240). (Has Protestant North American Strether never heard of Catholic confession?) This, then, is where James's dramatization of Strether's shaping, framing, structuring, habits leads: to a demonstration of the dangers, for moral insight, of those very activities. Such a demonstration will be even more tellingly underlined in the chapter that constitutes the peripety of *The Ambassadors*, and this will be considered in detail below.

It is not Strether's aesthetic sense alone that structures his perceptions and his fictions; not surprisingly, in Paris, his historical sense also is hyperactive. It is perhaps most luridly active in Madame de Vionnet's apartments, which may suggest that the historical fictionalizing sense and the erotic sense (all unrecognized) are not completely divorced. In Book Sixth, Strether associates Madame de Vionnet's apartments, and thus her heroic, romantic character, as he perceives it, with "some glory, some prosperity of the First Empire, some Napoleonic glamour, some dim lustre of the great legend" (p. 202). It suggests the world of Chateaubriand, of Madame de Staël, of the young Lamartine, to Strether. His historical sense is principally convinced by objects of fine art, by a collection of objects "founded much more on old accumulations that had possibly from time to time shrunken than on any contemporary method of acquisition or form of curiosity" (p. 202), that he might associate with Chad or Miss Gostrey. Such are the conditions of perception that the historical sense, generated by apartments, furniture, and decor, will create for Strether a Madame de Vionnet who is heroic and romantic. These "dim historical shades" (pp. 323-4) will assist Strether,

after the peripety, after the revelation of the precise nature of Madame de Vionnet's liaison with Chad, to cope with his moral shock by continuing heroically to romanticize her. Indeed, a reader prone to scepticism if not cynicism might, in the extended *mise-en-scène* (pp. 430-32) for the interview in Book Twelfth, find grounds for suspicion that Madame de Vionnet knowingly plays on Strether's historical sense. The scene is certainly suffused with James's histrionic sense—Nature is melodramatically thundery, the “excited and exciting” voice of Paris comes in through the open window. Strether thinks of omens, the revolution, and blood. His hostess is “dressed for thunderous times”, and her costume suggests Madame de Roland, who sacrificed duty to passion and died on the scaffold (the text does not supply this biographical information). Madame de Vionnet's dress enhances “the pathetic, the noble analogy.” While the narrator asserts that “if it was the perfection of art it would never—and that came to the same thing—be proved against her” (p. 432), the critical reader may well take up the suggestion that by art, Madame de Vionnet is playing on Strether's historical sense and through that his fictionalizing proclivities. That “multiform wedge” (p. 238) of seventy red-and-gold volumes of Victor Hugo cannot have left him unaffected.

In Book Seventh, Strether is presented with a crucial lesson, a lesson he might learn from the altered nature of his relations with Maria Gostrey. It is presented as a moral lesson, but it is also an aesthetic one; it may be taken not as a lesson for Strether alone, but for the reader of Henry James as well. “It was the proportions that were changed, and the proportions were at all times, he philosophised, the very conditions of perception, the terms of thought” (p. 269). In effect, Strether must learn the lessons of late nineteenth-century relativism, of which Henry James was an inheritor, of which his fictions, and particularly his “point of view” narrative technique, offer paradigms. It might be argued that one of the functions of the narrative progression of *The Ambassadors* is to educate Strether away from the over-rigid bipolar vision of life which he offers to Little Bilham after the “Live all you can” outburst.

“The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured.” (p. 183)

It must be asked whether Strether's “proportions” are necessary

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criteria of perception, or whether they are arbitrary, "fictions" of Strether's subjectivity. Strether, in an exchange that might have come from *The Sacred Fount*, is upbraided by Chad, and perhaps, by implication, by James.

"That's because you have, I verily believe, no imagination. You've other qualities. But no imagination, don't you see? at all."

"I dare say. I do see." It was an idea in which Chad showed interest.

"But, haven't you yourself rather too much?" (p. 395)

Only a page on, Strether is upbraided by Maria Gostrey in terms that recall Mrs Briss's strictures on the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*: 'Miss Gostrey gave a comprehensive sigh. "The way you reduce people to subjection."' The narrator-over-his-shoulder will, in turn, refer to Strether's "too interpretative innocence" (p. 428). James's dramatic rendering of the full responsibility that must be borne by Strether's proportionate perceiving, by his framing, his dramatizing, his historicizing, occurs in a climactic perception at the end of the first chapter of Book Twelfth.

Strether felt, oddly enough, before these facts, freshly and consentingly passive; they again so rubbed into him that the couple thus fixing his attention were intimate, that his intervention had absolutely aided and intensified their intimacy, and that in fine he must accept the consequences of that. He had absolutely become, himself, with his perceptions and his mistakes . . . the general spectacle of his art and his innocence, almost an added link and certainly a common priceless ground for them to meet upon. (p. 434)

Strether is, as it were, an example of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle at work within the imaginative sphere of narrative fiction. The presence of the observer alters the nature of the phenomena observed. Strether may have been exploited by Chad, and possibly by Madame de Vionnet; but there is no doubt that he is a victim of his own proportions, his own fictionalizing. He is well and truly framed. That this results in a moral blindness due to perception through false models, literary (Victor Hugo) and artistic (Lambinet) is crucial to the rendered sense of Strether's limitations (not "castration", *pace* the unnecessarily unpleasant E. M. Forster). It is also crucial to James's depiction of Strether's limitations, and to James's awareness and critique of the very framing, structuring, fictionalizing activities within which he, as author, and Strether, as character, operate. Just how sophisticated and thoroughgoing this double awareness is on James's part will, I trust, be yielded up by an analysis of chapters three and four of Book Eleventh, where Strether's golden frame is broken and his illusions shattered, at the same time as the im-

propriety of the Forster/McCarthy accusations against Henry James is demonstrated.

A novel as complex and prodigious as *The Ambassadors* may perhaps be permitted a number of climactic "scenes"—Strether's outburst in Gloriani's garden, his interviews with Madame de Vionnet, for example—but it may, strictly speaking, be allowed but one catastrophe. It is of crucial significance to a reading of the meta-textuality of *The Ambassadors* that the two chapters (XI: 3 and 4) which contain the catastrophe are also pervaded by a vocabulary derived from painting, drama, narrative, and textuality, and that the catastrophe itself is rendered through this vocabulary. By his deployment of such a vocabulary James proffers an ironic commentary upon that aesthetic *partie de campagne* which Strether is enjoying, and renders his, and the novel's, catastrophe as both moral and aesthetic.

Strether has "almost at random" alighted from a train at a station, under the impulse—"artless enough, no doubt"—of giving one of his last days in France over to enjoying the "cool special green" of French ruralism, "into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the picture-frame. It had been as yet for the most part but a land of fancy for him—the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters; practically as distant as Greece, but practically also well-nigh as consecrated" (p. 410). Strether hopes to find in French ruralism a scene that will remind him "of a certain small Lambinet" that he has seen in a Boston dealer's many years before. Bernard Richards¹⁸ has provided helpful documentation about a Lambinet exhibited in Boston in 1872, and about James's own possible connexion with that Lambinet. Richards offers the observation that "Strether wanders into the painting, but he does not become a figure in the painting: he is only aware of himself as a pair of eyes looking on, and still drawing an imaginary frame around what he sees." Strether anticipates reversing Lambinet's art: "It would be a different thing, however, to see the remembered mixture resolved back into its elements—to assist at the restoration to nature of the whole far-away hour" (p. 411). Thus, as Strether moves into the countryside, the "oblong gilt frame [which had contained the Lambinet in Boston] disposed its enclosing lines" and willows, reeds, and river "fell into a composition" (p. 411). It is not enough that the experience should

18 In Goode, *The Air of Reality*, p. 233.

lead him to reconstruct Lambinet back into Nature—the episode is also determined by a literary precursor. Thus the whole affair will remind him of Maupassant. The narrator-over-his-shoulder, not without ironic excess, suggests that Strether projects himself as partaking, before returning to Paris, of something “fried and felicitous” (surely an excessive and thus ironic Latinate alliteration) and then conversing with a driver, “who naturally wouldn’t fail of a stiff clean blouse” and “would tell him what the French people were thinking” (p. 412). At the risk of being abrupt in a fashion the Master would deplore, Strether is being set up for a fall. The dramatic catastrophe will also be an act of textual iconoclasm and semioclasm.

Leaving Maupassant behind, relaxing because Sarah Pocock has really gone, Strether “lost himself anew in Lambinet”, with a sense of “a finer harmony in things” (p. 413). In fact, “he really continued in the picture—that being for himself his situation—all the rest of this rambling day” (p. 415). So the charm of the “picture” is more than ever upon him about six o’clock when he finds himself conversing with the hostess of the Cheval Blanc. He has, also, during his day, “conversed with rustics who struck him perhaps a little more as men of the world than he had expected” (p. 415)—an early intimation of the catastrophe—; but he “had meanwhile not once overstepped the oblong gilt frame. The frame had drawn itself out for him, as much as you please” (p. 415). Having ordered his *cotelette de veau à l’oseille*, he reflects that though he had been alone all day, he had never felt so much engaged with others “and in the midstream of his drama. It might have passed for finished, his drama, with its catastrophe all but reached.” The vocabulary here is to be taken, I suggest, as the narrator’s proleptic irony directed against Strether and, by extension, James’s irony against Strether’s, and his own, aestheticizing of experience. For what had been at bottom the spell of the picture is that it was “essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky.” (The terminology is, of course, reminiscent of James’s *Notebooks*.) Even dinner-time is subjected to this indicative vocabulary; the difference of Woollett from France nowhere so asserts itself as in the “little court of the Cheval Blanc while he arranged with his hostess for a comfortable climax” (p. 416). Thus, to shift from the vocabulary of painting and drama to that of textuality, “not a breath of the cooler evening that wasn’t somehow a syllable of the text. The

text was simply, when condensed, that in *these* places such things were" (p. 417). Strether will need to be a better de-coder, a finer reader, than Forster or McCarthy, to perceive the full resonances of the text in front of him, a text *he* has been inscribing since he stepped off the train. But so secure is Strether within his inscriptions, within his oblong gilt frame, that he suffers no shock when his hostess mentions that she has just laid the cloth for two persons who, unlike Strether, have arrived by river, in a boat of their own. Thus, not for Strether, but for the reader, is the catastrophe announced: the catastrophe both of this bucolic sequence, and of the novel. Strether strolls out into the garden above the river, observes the sky to be "hatched across" (p. 418) with screens of trimmed trees, considers his "impression" of the river, and then, on that river, sees "something that gives him a sharper arrest." And here chapter three ends.

"What he saw was exactly the right thing"—thus begins chapter four. Depending on how one reads "right", this vision could be aesthetically just, morally proper, or, combining those two possibilities and ironically subverting them, a preparation for (the) catastrophe. What he sees is what "had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day . . . to fill up the measure" (p. 418). We have a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman "easy and fair", with a pink parasol to aid the "impression", to give a focal point of colour to the scene. They give the impression of being acquainted with the neighbourhood, and of being "expert, familiar, frequent"; yet their boat does seem to begin to drift wider, and the lady appears to observe something as a consequence of which "their course wavered, and it continued to waver while they just stood off." Strether realizes that he knows the lady "whose parasol, shifting as if to hide her face, made so fine a pink point in the shining scene." Which perception brings Strether, and the reader, to the last sentence of the opening paragraph of this chapter.

It was too prodigious, a chance in a million, but, if he knew the lady, the gentleman, who still presented his back and kept off, the gentleman, the coatless hero of the idyll, who had responded to her start, was, to match the marvel, none other than Chad. (p. 419)

This "marvel" of a sentence may be offered as a paradigmatic defence of James against those detractors who abhor his over-concern with aesthetics, his religion of style, his baroque sentences. What does this sentence (the last of the opening paragraph) do in its peregrinations, its circumnavigations—to appropriate the novel's dominant pattern of imagery—but keep Strether, and the

reader, away from the irrefutable identification, the not-to-be-denied act of naming, the appearance of the word "Chad", kept to the sentence's and the paragraph's end like the Last Trumpet? So unwilling is Strether to accept what for the moment is (morally) merely coincidence that he must think of it "as queer as fiction, as farce". But, on reflection, he realizes that the couple in that morally emblematic boat, "would show nothing if they could feel sure he hadn't made them out" (p. 419). This hesitation, and his own hesitation, are like "a sharp fantastic crisis that had popped up in a dream" (p. 420). He feels that they are "trying" him, and all for some reason "that broke the stillness like some unprovoked harsh note." It is Strether who makes (is forced to make) the moral decision to acknowledge his friends, under an "odd impression as of violence averted", the violence of their cutting him "out there in the eye of nature." This awareness of their mutual almost-violence "darkened his vision for the moment", but, once they are ashore, clarity is restored as "everything found itself sponged over by the mere miracle of their encounter" (p. 420).

The canvas once sponged over, it may be assumed that Strether's impressions of the scene may be clearer than heretofore. Or, to alter the metaphor (and the alteration is mine, not James's) the oblong gilt frame is irreparably broken for, from this moment on, contrive how Chad and Madame de Vionnet may, however guilty Strether may feel (will they think he has "plotted" (p. 421) the coincidence?), Strether is aware of the truth of the situation in which he has been implicated. He cannot deny that they are "indubitably intimate with the last intimacy".¹⁹ No matter how much Strether may explain, no matter how little Chad may say, no matter how much Madame de Vionnet may "overflow . . . wholly in French", no matter how much "fiction and fable were, inevitably, in the air" (pp. 421, 422, 423), the truth has been revealed. As Strether reflects at the chapter's end:

He foresaw that Miss Gostrey would come again into requisition on the morrow; though it wasn't to be denied that he was already a little afraid of her 'What on earth—that's what I want to know now—had you then supposed?' He recognised at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things. (p. 426)

For Strether, the incidents of his *partie de campagne* represent

19 *Notebooks*, p. 409.

an irreversible moral awakening. (Such an awakening is symptomatic of James's endings—cf. the last sentence of *The Wings of the Dove*, for example.) At a metatextual level, they indicate an irruption of the moral into the aesthetic, the breaking of a pre-determined structuring frame by the urgencies of human passion. It may be ironic that at the very time that Strether is intent on restoring Art to Nature, human nature breaks the bounds of art. In Strether's catastrophe, James is offering a cautionary tale about the dangers of framing, of structuring, of the aestheticizing of experience. It may be significant that, his eyes opened, *his* canvas sponged over, Strether does not revert to Lambinet or to the oblong gilt frame; though he, and James, are, as has been indicated above, still dramatizing and framing in Book Twelfth.

James, it must be admitted, does not abandon *his* gilt frames—*The Ambassadors* hardly proceeds to a High Modernist logical conclusion to its strategies of Book Eleventh. *That* would have involved a violation of that symmetrical structure so dear to James, and so rightly observed by Forster; *that* would have involved breaking this particular golden bowl. Of course, *The Golden Bowl* was to follow, a novel no less complex and meta-textual in its consideration of aesthetics, aestheticism, and the aestheticizing of the moral life. For *The Ambassadors* to have proceeded to a logical conclusion to its strategies, it would have had to break its own symmetrical form, to violate its prized "superior roundness", to reject the metaphors of the aestheticizing and historicizing of experience that had pervaded it; it would have had to become, say, analogous to the final pages of the "Oxen of the Sun" episode of *Ulysses*. Henry James would have had to become James Joyce or, rather, become Henry Joyce, as he would, had he been a character in *Ulysses*, or become "hen, rejoice!" as he doubtless would, had he figured in *Finnegans Wake*. But *The Ambassadors* is the initiating Modernist novel par excellence, not Modernism's ultimate expression. Yet it must be insisted that *The Ambassadors* is Modernist, and that one form its Modernism takes is in its reflexivism, the awareness of its own principles of construction and being; and that awareness, in mainstream Modernist fashion, is essentially critical and auto-critical. James's reflexivism, his self-critical stance (that is, his *texts'* self-criticism), his metatextuality, give a resounding lie to E. M. Forster's and Mary McCarthy's strictures.