NOTES ON READING *THE AMBASSADORS* FOR THE FIRST TIME (winter-spring, 2008)

CONTEXT

I write here a commentary-in-progress, unlikely ever to be finished, on what I make of some aspects of *The Ambassadors*,[1] the current text in our book group within the Center for Independent Study **http://www.cistudy.org/membernews.html** in New Haven.[2] I welcome reader comments (which you may post on my blog (**http://www.richardyanowitz.com/blog/?p=20#respond**) and/or e-mail to me at **ry@richardyanowitz.com**) on that and any other subject I take up here.

It's been over 40 years since I read any James (none of which I remember) in a grad school course in my early 20s; I'm pretty sure I skimped heavily on the required reading. Two memories about my reaction may color my current experience: I kept thinking at that time, "He's a brilliant writer, but I find his content unreadable," and my sketchy understanding of him was dominated by stress on point of view and the concomitant message of "never take the (carefully examined) text at face value."[3]

Reading this novel is still a chore, a busman's holiday for a literary critic, and the plot holds no allure for me; indeed, I find it the saga of a class of people deservedly defunct as the serious (as opposed to satiric) target of authors' attentions.[4] The close reading required to make any sense of the novel is exhausting: every phrase and line is overloaded with implications. But this time, with the discipline of "having" to read it so I can participate in our book group discussion, I have found myself increasingly stimulated. The plot has not become more engaging, but the book stands as a gigantic, often frustrating, puzzle to me (not unlike the events around him that Strether has so much trouble deciphering), and I have found myself driven to understand what James is up to.

I have no sweeping thesis about the novel (other than, perhaps, James is really tough to read and understand), but without knowing how much of what I say has already been covered by critics, I have some smaller theses and analyses to offer.

1 My history with critical theory

I cut my teeth on critical theory in my final two undergraduate years, 1961-63. Heavily under the influence of admiration for Paul Fussell, Jr., then at Rutgers, I embraced the New Criticism. The great virtue of this experience is that it disciplined me in close reading. The drawback, as I was to learn over the years, is that any single approach cuts one off from other rewarding approaches.

After Rutgers, where I ended up with a degree in philosophy and was one course shy of a major in English, I had a couple of mediocre, uninspiring experiences as a grad student in English (Claremont and Berkeley), but when I returned to Berkeley in 1972 (after dropping out for five years) and switched to focusing on the Renaissance, my critical and intellectual worlds (to the extent they differ) were transformed. At the time I was told that the Berkeley and Harvard Renaissance departments, in no particular order, were widely rated 1 and 2 in the country. At Berkeley I found all received truths about Renaissance thought, which was anyway new to me, up for grabs, and suddenly, where my truculent tendency to question received ideas used to come under frequent disapproval from mentors, my temperament was encouraged.[5]

From these years I began finding new, gratifying approaches to literature—to mingle with, not replace, the close reading taught me be the New Criticism. Norman Rabkin's exposition of the anti-theatrical prejudice indirectly introduced me to the possibility of psychological criticism and gave me a perspective that, by the time I finished my dissertation (significantly updated content to be gradually posted on this web site (http://www.richardyanowitz.com/dissertation%20main%20page.html), I had expanded to *all* Renaissance creative writing. Stanley Fish's reader-response approach[6] opened new possibilities on how readers, writers and texts can interact, and how authors can set up our expectations and then toy with or "betray" us. This approach was reinforced for me by Paul Alpers' examination of *The Faerie Queene.*[7] I grooved on Stephen Booth's treatment of the political and physical implications of the setting of masques. From sources I can't name, I came to embrace biographical and historical contexts for assessing texts. I expect I was influenced in psychological analysis by scattered course references to Fred Crews's work (though I only actually read *The Pooh Perplex*[8]). Ironically, Stephen Greenblatt, who became my dissertation director and with whom I took a few seminars, never got across to me the importance of his own ground-breaking work in attitudes towards the self;[9] but he exposed me to other fascinating critical analyses, labels for which I don't even know; and since finishing the Ph.D. I have found his new historicism, about which I have read only snippets, quite persuasive as another (still not THE) critical discipline.[10] Training in acting (not part of my graduate education) made me sensitive to sub-text and back-stories. Most of all, and in

keeping with a temperament probably going back to childhood, I was most fascinated by history of ideas (or intellectual history), which, as the basis for my dissertation, was to force me to learn a whole new way of writing."[11] In that context, and as a result of my early immersion in sciences (which still fascinate me), I chose history of science as my outside doctoral field.

During my first course after my return to Berkeley, Paul Alpers uttered a seemingly offhand remark that became a guiding principle: "All criticism is autobiography." One of my early uses of this insight, inspired by a 1976 analysis by Ellen Moers in the *New York Review of Books* of the Frankenstein monster's reflecting Mary Shelley's fear of childbirth,[12] was the concluding chapter of my dissertation, on writers' fears of criticism of their work as analogous to parental fears about child-rearing. The reader may wish to reflect on the relation of my interest to the fact that early in my return to Berkeley in 1972, I became a single parent of a 4-month old son.)

2 "Realism"

At least since finishing my philosophy degree in 1963, I have taken for granted that, in addition to the impossibility of "objectivity," no system of thought is without its internal contradictions—and that this truth does not intrinsically invalidate all systems of thought but rather should prompt us to examine them with many grains of salt, extract those portions that satisfy us, and ultimately build (and re-build) a set of eclectic philosophical principles (to the extent that we can be bothered to work out a "philosophy") with consciousness of their inconsistencies.[13]

Coming to James this year, therefore, I expected inconsistencies in any literary theory by or about him. Nor was I deceived. This comes out, for example, in his efforts to define a "realism" with which he claims to want to frame his fiction. To summarize this point—since it is not my main focus, and I don't care to re-plow well tossed ground—I'll recapitulate arguments by Priscilla L. Walton (*The Disruption in the Feminine in Henry James*, Toronto, 1992), who contends "It is difficult to derive from James's writings any clear understanding of what he means by the term 'Realism.'" [13] Indeed, James is not alone in this problem. "[H]e is like many theorists of Realism, who also hesitate to offer a definition of the mode because of its amorphous nature." [13] The problem lies in defining satisfactory boundaries of "realism" within what is intrinsically "unreal": fiction.

> [As] Charles Rosen and Henry Zerner point out in *Romanticism and Realism*,… 'Realist' has too often been confused with 'realistic…' Realism, as an artistic movement, began in France in the middle of the nineteenth century and manifested itself primarily in the visual arts and in literature. As an aesthetic doctrine, Realism dictated that any aspect of life was suitable for a novel…. Realism's subject matter was to be culled from banal, everyday scenes and situations, and the beauty of its artistic representation was to be found in its form…. Realism purports…to offer an objective and accurate representation of life as it is, not as the author might wish it to be. [14]

An implicit bond must exist between author and audience: "Realist belief [holds] that literature contains an essential 'truth' about 'life,' and that the Realist novelist can present 'reality' in such an objective and detailed fashion that all readers will recognize the validity of their own - and the author's - vision." [15] But, as James makes clear in his essays, this is easier said then done:

> [He] believes that the novel must produce the 'illusion of life' and suggest the variety of 'the human spectacle,' and that these are achieved, to some extent, through detail…. Authorial intrusions are…anathema to James, since they detract from the 'air of reality' by reminding the reader that the related events are fictional. [15-16]

This ideal, however, is impossible to attain: "…a series of contradictions…permeates James's essays. For example, how must the novel be like history yet not be too much like history?" [17][14]

A key thesis that Walton extrapolates particularly intrigues me because it echoes for nineteenth-century aesthetics a topic on which I focused in my dissertation on Tudor attitudes towards the power of language: the degree to which writers unconsciously subvert their goals, revealing self-doubts about the legitimacy of what they write. Her own study, Walton writes, "is largely concerned with the ways in which James's texts subvert their explicitly Realist, nineteenth-century ideology," a phenomenon "largely apparent in the texts' self-reflexive attempts to bind women." [29][15]

For me, interesting questions center around the extent to which James's writing is internally consistent, and when it's not, why isn't it? At this point[16] I can't provide sufficient answers, but in tackling how James

handles point-of-view in *The Ambassadors*, my working hypothesis is that James always does so self-consciously and flawlessly, so that apparent inconsistencies should, after close examination, make sense.[17]

3 A bit of reader-response analysis of *The Ambassadors*

> *Strether's first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted.* [Opening line of the novel, I.1/1.17]

Unless we monitor and record our responses at every moment of reading, it is, of course, impossible later to be sure *exactly* what we felt when reading a passage for the first time. Here, amplified from what I said to our CIS discussion group, is my stab at capturing that first reaction:

- A man with a peculiar name is introduced in a context of uncertainty ("question") and will ask other questions in the course of the novel (since this is the "first").
- Before we hear the question, the author or narrator interrupts to let us know Strether is probably not at home but at a stopping point in a journey, location not yet known, and is probably arriving after a long walk or a vehicle ride ("reached") to the "hotel" directly from an disembarkation point (train? ship? coach?).
- Strether is a conscientious person (regardless of any travel weariness or curiosity about his lodgings, he immediately asks about someone close to him).
- Strether is conflicted: he asks a concerned question but is not upset ("yet on his learning") with an answer that delays contact with his "friend"—another character with a curious name. Does Strether have ambivalent feelings about the friend (or how much the man *is* a "friend")? Is he a private person who just likes time to himself? Is his conscientiousness a self-conscious duty rather than an admirable reflex?
- "Apparently" introduces some uncertainty about exactly what is happening and what kind of time Strether has to himself before the arrival of his friend.
- It is daylight; my first impression was afternoon rather than morning, perhaps because the text prompted me to expect that Strether had been already traveling for a while that day.
- For a moment Strether's question has a virtuous and sensitive goal (asking about his "friend"), but (already a mini-violation of reader expectations) the text immediately undermines that sense: Strether is not overly upset about this unexpected eventuality, but he feels uncomfortable that he is not more troubled ("he was not wholly disconcerted"). If Strether is indeed arriving from a longish trip, perhaps he feels energized or excited in a way that makes him want to be alone, at least for awhile.

Here are a few of the added responses I have when I re-read this sentence after finishing the novel:

- Strether is indeed a man who intellectualizes—or rather, over-intellectualizes—about anything and everything. He is always asking questions—and often confidently inferring wrong answers. How will this habit play out in the ensuing sentences at the start of the novel? How often this time through the novel will I notice him getting things wrong, and of what consequences will I now be aware (in addition to consequences I can remember from the first reading)?
- This hotel is indeed but a stopping-point in a long journey, far longer emotionally (and spiritually?) than the geography and travel time involved. The first time through the opening chapters, I accompanied Strether on important formative experiences in England and expected considerable emphasis on that country; but now I know that Strether will be in Paris for nearly the whole novel, and that the English experience will fade into a dim distance of importance (with a brief reminder at the end when Strether learns Chad has been to England and back). More than anything, however, the importance of this hotel, is that it is where Strether will meet Maria Gostrey.
- The word "apparently" recurs, as do all sorts of other words and phrases that raise uncertainty (the most common, I think, is "as if"), throughout the novel.[18] What does all the hedging and qualifying in the novel tell me about events? What (or whose) judgments should I accept about events? Is there *any* bedrock of truth or reality within the novel? Are Strether's visual observations any more reliable than his intellectual efforts?
- If anything, on this reading—knowing something of Strether's travel history—I am more persuaded that it is afternoon (early afternoon, I suspect). I cannot remember what time of day Waymarsh actually arrives, and I'll watch for that. But this information does not seem important for understanding the novel.

- Waymarsh's "friendship" will turn out to be quite compromised and his motives highly suspect.[19] Perhaps Strether already senses shortcomings in Waymarsh, and that is why he is "not wholly disconcerted" to put off their meeting. Their common New England background will become decreasingly important; Waymarsh will become increasingly allied with the interests of Mrs. Newsome (of whom I may already be thinking at this second reading) and the traditional, suffocating life her interests represent in contrast with Strether's changes and the theme of freedom that keeps popping up. In the course of the novel, do Strether's changes represent growth, or by the end has he merely come full circle? I need to watch this development more closely during this reading, and I suspect I still won't be sure when I've finished.
- Not intrinsic to reading and re-reading the novel but a convenient stimulus: Once having begun the novel the first time, I became curious about background, and so I read some random secondary materials. It turns out that James was prone to record potential character names, "usually taken from the London *Times*," in a notebook.

> The following names that appear in *The Ambassadors* are taken from these undated lists: the date preceding each given below is that of the entry immediately preceding the list from which the name is taken:
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> > August 6, 1884: "Chad"; March 4, 1985: "Mme de Vionnet"; May 11, 1895: "Gostrey"; May 16, 1899: "Newsome," "Milrose," "Waymark" (the last is the name James used for Waymarsh in his preliminary statement for *The Ambassadors*); August 9, 1900: "Strether"; September 11, 1900: "Bilham," Barrace."
>
> [Editor's commentary within the Norton Critical Edition, 371-2]

I don't know what to make of James's attraction to most of these names, but the change from Waymark to Waymarsh prompts a suspicion (possible just from reading the novel, but I didn't think of it at the time) that "marsh" should elicit thoughts of entanglement, staleness, and perhaps some vague stench.[20] This attention also makes me reflect a bit more on why Mme de Vionnet and Miss Gostrey have such similar first names—what similarities should we find in them and the tension between them? Does the near difference in names suggest two similar people who can't get in synch?[21]

Now that I've outlined my own first and second responses to this sentence (and assuming they are representative of other readers' experiences), the question is: does any of that help our appreciation of the text in any way?[22] I only have limited answers to that question right now, but since I think answers are related to how James handles point-of-view in *The Ambassadors*, let me move to that topic.

4 Point of view technique in *The Ambassadors*

Had I not been anticipating point-of-view issues, I would probably have started *The Ambassadors* assuming an omniscient third-person narrator and maybe before too long have shifted to "narrator inside Strether's thoughts and feelings." (One question, then—for which I don't have an answer: did James set up this sequence of reader responses? Probably not, but if he did, why?)

That the narrator somehow has access to Strether's brain and feelings seems to be the common attitude of critics. So far as I know, it was first set forth by Percy Lubbock in 1921, who writes that the book "never passes outside the circle of his [Strether's] thought," [*The Craft of Fiction*, 414][23] although a couple of pages later he qualifies this: "the point of view is primarily Strether's." [415] Lubbock adds that "our point of view is his [Strether's]" [419] and that James's "Strether is apparently in the position of a narrator throughout." [420]

While such a perspective is complex to the extent that we find Strether himself complex, it is still a relatively straightforward principle. Were we able to take *all* the narrative as Strether's own words (or thoughts), it would offer a promising interpretive approach that would allow us to question at every moment what the narrative has right and what it doesn't, and what those answers tell us. But while Strether is *always* on the narrative stage, his presence does not mean that all actions must be from his point of view. The narrative voice, I think, is much more complex and elusive—or, to put it another way, if Strether *were* the narrator, then James's skill would frequently be lacking, because I find frequent "slippages" away from Strether. I think they are deliberate.

From time to time, for example, the narrator appears to pass his[24] own judgments independently of Strether's point of view. While it is always possible that such moments are authorial inconsistencies (in the spirit of "even Shakespeare nods"), I find the novel too carefully worked out to jump to such a

conclusion.[25] The most obvious of moments when the narrator is looking at Strether from the outside are repetitions of phrases like "our friend" and "poor Strether."

Sometimes the narrator seems to be commenting on Strether or speaking directly to us. Learning that Chad "went about little in the 'colony'" and "had quite another interest," Strether concludes that the "interest" is a "deep" one, but: "He couldn't see as yet how deep. Might he not all too soon!" [IV.2/9.103; emphasis added][26] Sometimes the narrator seems to be in another character's, as when Strether visits Maria after receiving Mrs. Newsome's ultimatum by cable: "Strether's hostess, it might have been made out, just escaped changing colour." [VII.3/2.190; emphasis added][27]

On a few occasions the narrator is self-conscious, as when he writes, "If we should go into all that occupied our friend in the watches of the night we should have to mend our pen; but an instance or two may mark for us the vividness with which he could remember," [III.2/7.91] where "mend our pen" (as opposed to "we" or "us," which the narrator often says) offers a flash of writer-narrator (but not James) scribbling in his manuscript.[28] At another point he is actually "I": "the quickening, as I have called it…" [VII.3/18.195][29]

In this section I (your commentator) am, alas, severely limited by lack of knowledge of other works of James; I do not know how much of what I address may be generally true of how he handles point of view or how specific are the techniques in *The Ambassadors*.

4.1 The future of the text (1)

Many times the text reports events that occur between the current narrative moment and the time when the author/narrator is telling the tale. The question: who exactly is relating that knowledge of what is to come? For example, at the end of Book I Waymarsh returns from a "mysterious" errand and "though they were convinced he had made some extraordinary purchase they were never to learn its nature." [I.3.3.41][30] While often the narrator is so much in Strether's head as to provide a tone of immediacy to what "our friend" is thinking or feeling, at moments like this "forecast" it does not seem possible that Strether is speaking.[31]

In a more complex way (or so it seems at the time), when concluding the discussion between Strether and Maria over what the Woollett factory manufactures, James toys with the line not just between narrator and Strether but also with the author. The narrative informs us: "But it may even now frankly be mentioned that he in the sequel never *was* to tell her." [II.1/4.48)] It does not seem possible that "frankly" can be Strether's word; it must be "spoken" by someone who is judging Strether—the fictive narrator. The more cunning part of the manipulation here, however, must be James's own, for it is deliberate trickery, never a trait of our narrator. The phraseology ("he in the sequel never *was* to tell her") encourages us to think that the whole topic will never arise again. We may speculate about the product, but we know (or think we know) neither Maria nor, by proxy, we will ever again get a chance to identify it—though we may entertain ourselves by seeking to determine it from hints elsewhere in the text. (I don't think such efforts can ever be conclusive; if James actually drops such hints, as some critics argue, it is to tease rather than gratify the reader.) When James *does* re-raise the question towards the end of the novel, he also re-raises our curiosity and allows us to think, briefly, that we will finally get an answer (and, by the way, thereby test whatever theory we contrived about the product). James quickly twists our expectations yet again: Maria passes up both her and our chance to learn the product. In fact, Maria is right: knowing the product is irrelevant to anything about the events of the novel. Our own (selfish) frustration at Maria's decision reveals our culpability at being distracted by such red herrings. If we find the narrative difficult (as I certainly do), we collude in exacerbating that problem by allowing James (not the narrator) to promote our focus on such distractions.

If this were the only occurrence of such a "manipulation," my argument about reader culpability would be making much more of a possibly clever deception than is warranted. But the novel frequently provides equivalent "shocks" at broad levels. When I first came upon the description of Strether's loss of wife and son [II.1/4.43], I had to re-read the lines a couple of times to assure myself that they said what I thought they did; the casual way James injects such disturbing information into the narrative—and then briefly mentions one or both of them only three more times [II.2/5.61,63; VIII.2/20.210]—may prompt us to consider this history as motivating Strether's current actions, but it is also deeply disturbing and, at some level, bewildering (like the unnamed product of Mrs. Newsome's factory?). Similar sexual confusion abounds. Throughout the novel James toys with the reader's inferences about whether Chad and Mme. De Vionnet have slept together—and then surprises both reader and Strether with the rowboat scene so late in the novel. (Indeed, even there we must infer the information.) The contemporary culture within which James was writing and to which he seems responsive in its silence on sexual matters re-inforces our

uncertainty, because James only obliquely, euphemistically, has the text or characters refer to sex, though again and again our prurient minds (and presumably those of James's contemporary readers) respond to suggestions of sexual improprieties between other characters—Waymarsh and Miss Barrace, Waymarsh and Sarah, Miss Barrace's hinting at Jim and Mme De Vionnet as a couple [X.1/25.266] (before we witness the rowboat scene and can look back to reject the insinuation…or wonder if Mme de Vionnet has been spreading the wealth), Mamie's interest in Bilham, and the way we are pulled back and forth about how to assess the precise feelings between Strether and Maria.[32] We may even wonder about Strether's exact interest in Mrs. Newsome (the impersonality of whom is reinforced by the failure of her first name to be used by either Strether or the novel) as a sexual partner—Strether who seems so de-sexed (because he has never gotten over the death of his wife?) and whose frequent passions (seemingly stirred by his presence in Paris[33]) are sublimated into thoughts and sublime "feelings."

4.2 The future of the text (2)

Future references often occur via a past tense of the verb "to be" followed by an infinitive.[34] For example, when Chad first introduces Madame de Vionnet to him, Strether judges her use of English as a protection against a "danger." Referring to such precautions, the narrator tells us: "Later on he was to feel many more of them, but by that time he was to feel other things besides."[35] [V.2/11.128] Not only does it seem unlikely (to put it mildly) that Strether is describing the "later on," but the text (the narrator) also asks us to keep an eye out for all the things Strether will come to feel, both in general and specifically in relation to Mme de Vionnet. I forgot this cautionary information during my first reading; I should not were I to re-read the novel.

While many instances of a form of "to be" plus infinitive are unique, one keeps recurring: a version of "was to remember," a reminder that at one level Strether perceives (or will come to perceive) events around him as part of a giant puzzle, or part of a landscape being painted throughout the novel while he watches ("memorizes" it? "memorializes" it?), the constituent parts of which he is gradually given (or gradually gathers) as, typically too late to be of any use to him, he builds and re-builds understandings of events. Immediately after sighting Chad and Mme.de Vionnet in their boat, the narrator, who rarely repeats himself, tells us in successive sentences that "Strether indeed was afterwards to remember" and "Strether was to remember afterwards" [XI.4/31.311]—referring not to any horrid truth or sense of betrayal, but to Chad's "intervention" to shield Mme de Vionnet's from infamous rumors. The second phrase continues: "Strether was to remember afterwards further that this had had for him the effect of forming Chad's almost sole intervention; and indeed he was to remember further still, in subsequent meditation, many things that, as it were, fitted together."[36] (Once again, a re-reading should keep me on the lookout for such meditations.)

At least one occurrence of this syntax blurs speaker and temporal moments:

> "Do I strike you as improved?" Strether was to recall that Chad had at this point enquired.
>
> He was likewise to recall--and it had to count for some time as his greatest comfort--that it had been "given" him, as they said at Woollett, to reply with some presence of mind:. [IV.1/8.95]

The first occurrence of "was to recall" sounds like an omniscient narrator looking back from the future; the repeated "was likewise to recall" probably is, too, but *might* be Strether's own sensibility, in the sense that he is (was) conscious of his "gift" of "some presence of mind" (is this ironic praise from either narrator or James?) as he replies to Chad. The overall effect is to confuse who is speaking when—a merger of present and future (or is it past and future, or past and present?). What exactly is the message of such an effect? I'm not sure. Perhaps the movement of the words evokes the continuing tie Strether has to Woollett even as he is trying to be free of that influence. Perhaps it suggests the impossibility of truly breaking with one's past.[37]

4.3 Time running backward and all over the place

The hardest passage for me among numerous hard passages in the novel[38] occurs at VIII.1/19.202-3, as we learn that the Pococks are arriving in France, to be met at Havre and accompanied on to Paris:

> It was the advantage of his having let his fancy lose itself for a little in the gloom that, as by reaction, the prospect began really to brighten from the moment the deputation from Woollett alighted on the platform of the station. They had come straight from Havre, having sailed from New York to that port, and having also, thanks to a happy voyage, made land with a promptitude that left Chad Newsome, who had meant to meet them at the dock, belated. He had received their

> telegram, with the announcement of their immediate further advance, just as he was taking the train for Havre, so that nothing had remained for him but to await them in Paris. He hastily picked up Strether, at the hotel, for this purpose, and he even, with easy pleasantry, suggested the attendance of Waymarsh as well--Waymarsh, at the moment his cab rattled up, being engaged, under Strether's contemplative range, in a grave perambulation of the familiar court. Waymarsh had learned from his companion, who had already had a note, delivered by hand, from Chad, that the Pococks were due, and had ambiguously, though, as always, impressively, glowered at him over the circumstance; carrying himself in a manner in which Strether was now expert enough to recognise his uncertainty, in the premises, as to the best tone. The only tone he aimed at with confidence was a full tone--which was necessarily difficult in the absence of a full knowledge. The Pococks were a quantity as yet unmeasured, and, as he had practically brought them over, so this witness had to that extent exposed himself. He wanted to feel right about it, but could only, at the best, for the time, feel vague. "I shall look to you, you know, immensely," our friend had said, "to help me with them," and he had been quite conscious of the effect of the remark, and of others of the same sort, on his comrade's sombre sensibility. He had insisted on the fact that Waymarsh would quite like Mrs. Pocock--one could be certain he would: he would be with her about everything, and she would also be with HIM, and Miss Barrace's nose, in short, would find itself out of joint.
>
> Strether had woven this web of cheerfulness while they waited in the court for Chad; he had sat smoking cigarettes to keep himself quiet while, caged and leonine, his fellow traveller paced and turned before him. Chad Newsome was doubtless to be struck, when he arrived, with the sharpness of their opposition at this particular hour; he was to remember, as a part of it, how Waymarsh came with him and with Strether to the street and stood there with a face half-wistful and half-rueful. They talked of him, the two others, as they drove, and Strether put Chad in possession of much of his own strained sense of things. He had already, a few days before, named to him the wire he was convinced their friend had pulled--a confidence that had made on the young man's part quite hugely for curiosity and diversion.

I have had to read this section again and again, and only when I came to write the following did it gradually (again with numerous readings and re-tracings) make sense to me.

We learn that "the deputation from Woollett alighted on the platform of the station." Though unspecified, this must be a train station in Paris, because "They had come straight from Havre." The narrator explains that Chad was unable to "meet them at the dock" but had to "await them in Paris." On the cab ride to the Paris station, Chad stops to pick up Strether "at the hotel, for this purpose, and he even, with easy pleasantry, suggested the attendance of Waymarsh as well..." "This purpose" has no antecedent; we assume it refers to meeting the Pococks at the station; nor does the narrative explain how Chad alerted Strether to this improvised plan. The redundancy of "even" and "as well" echo Strether's awkward feelings towards the friend who has betrayed him. For the moment, though, we don't know how Waymarsh has come into the picture; this is clarified only in the next phrase, following an em-dash: "Waymarsh, at the moment his cab rattled up, being engaged, under Strether's contemplative range, in a grave perambulation of the familiar court." Since the most recent antecedent of "his" (in "his cab rattled up") is Waymarsh, why, I wondered, did Waymarsh just happen to appear in a cab at this moment, and why is that cab circling in the courtyard? In fact, time is running backward, and the cab is Chad's: Waymarsh was strolling in the hotel courtyard; Strether was silently watching him; Chad's cab drove up to the "court" on its way to the station.

Time continues to move in reverse, to slightly before Waymarsh is "perambulating": "Waymarsh had learned from his companion, who had already had a note, delivered by hand, from Chad, that the Pococks were due, and had ambiguously, though, as always, impressively, glowered at him over the circumstance…" "Ambiguously" applies to the narrative itself here as much as to the (supposedly) unclear meaning of Waymarsh's "glower."

Now we move slightly forward in time, from Waymarsh's learning of the Pococks' arrival to the moment he and Strether are in the courtyard waiting for Chad. We move firmly inside Strether's head to listen to him reflect on how the Pococks' presence will affect the world of those around him; with an intriguing meanness, he relishes the thought of Ms. Barrace's imminent discomfiture at Sarah's presence: "He had insisted on the fact that Waymarsh would quite like Mrs. Pocock--one could be certain he would: he would be with her about everything, and she would also be with *him*, and Miss Barrace's nose, in short, would find itself out of joint."

A new paragraph begins by suspending time to set the context for Strether's uncharitable thoughts and to drag out (as Strether and Waymarsh must have felt time dragged while they waited) this period of relative inaction: "Strether had woven this web of cheerfulness while they waited in the court for Chad; he had sat smoking cigarettes to keep himself quiet while, caged and leonine, his fellow traveller paced and turned before him." "Woven this web of cheerfulness" juxtaposes the image of a patiently malevolent spider with the irony of "cheerfulness" as a description of Strether's churlish ruminations. Waymarsh's being "caged" raises the question of who is actually caging him and why he feels that way.

Then, from this moment in the courtyard (in between Chad's hurrying to meet the Pococks and the moment of the Pococks' actual arrival in Paris), we visit a speculative future (via multiple uses of "was" + an infinitive): "Chad Newsome was doubtless to be struck, when he arrived, with the sharpness of their opposition at this particular hour…" I was once alerted to the principle that the term "doubtless" (or "no doubt") intrinsically raises doubt, and I think that is true here—that Strether is trying to persuade himself of what Chad will think.[39] "Was…to be struck, when he arrived" is anticipating Chad's imminent, but future, arrival in the court, and Strether is (impatiently, surely) awaiting (hoping for) Chad's recognition of the sudden tension in the Strether-Waymarsh relationship (and, we may infer, that Chad will at once take Strether's side against Waymarsh). After a semi-colon, the narrative repeats the syntax but with what feels like a shifted point of view: "he [Chad] was to remember, as a part of it, how Waymarsh came with him and with Strether to the street and stood there with a face half-wistful and half-rueful." It is no longer clear that this is Strether's speculation. It reads more like a statement of fact by the narrator in his wisdom as he writes the account from the future. Indeed, it is not clear if the street scene is already happening in the narrative or is only in Strether's mind. For in the *next* sentence, with no apparent transition, the cab seems to have left the hotel and is continuing to the station: "They talked of him, the two others, as they drove, and Strether put Chad in possession of much of his own strained sense of things." Are Chad and Strether talking about Waymarsh, and is Waymarsh not in the cab even though Chad invited him? Yes, but it takes a few readings to get that. Is this why, a sentence earlier, Waymarsh looked "half-wistful and half-rueful?" Does Strether' "strained sense of things" refer to his rift with Waymarsh over the latter's letters to Mrs. Newsome that brought the Pococks to Paris? Apparently yes: we move back in time again to learn: "He [Strether] had already, a few days before, named to him the wire he was convinced their friend had pulled--a confidence that had made on the young man's part quite hugely for curiosity and diversion." So maybe "doubtless" was *not* a term of insecurity.[40]

Many generalizations based on this passage come to mind, but I suspect they would be insufficiently developed without much further thought and reading, so I shall forego them for now.[41]

4.4 A note on adverbs and point of view

Most adverbs[42] in the novel reflect Strether's own sensibility, as in the opening sentence cited above and the second sentence after it (my emphasis added):

> The same secret principle, however, that had prompted Strether <u>not absolutely</u> to desire Waymarsh's presence at the dock, that had led him thus to postpone for a few hours his enjoyment of it, now operated to make him feel he could still wait without disappointment… [I.1/1.17]

These Stretherian adverbs underscore what comes to seem an endless series of qualifications (cf. "apparently") within the novel, a telling topic but not one I will address further.

In a sizable minority of cases, however, clarifying adverbs seem to come from the same narrator who is for a moment *not* in Strether's head—the narrator who can stand aloof and say "poor Strether." These occasions have gradations of point-of-view precision: several pages into the book, for example, we read that "Waymarsh's acknowledgement…was characteristically indirect," [I.2/2.33] where "characteristically" might reflect Strether's judgment but at least as possibly is the "narrator's" comment.[43] But in other places the distance between narrator and Strether is more clear-cut: in Book IX, for example, the narrator comments that Maria "candidly echoed" words of Strether's[44] and adds that Strether "fancifully expressed the issue" [IX.3/24.244] when declaiming his commitment to Chad's well-being. While "candidly" could remotely be Strether's description, I don't see how "fancifully" could.[45]

4.5 Moving pictures

Only as I thought I was nearing completion of this essay (and a full reading of the novel[46]) did I flash on a unifying principle for the point of view I have been describing: a hand-held movie camera with a zoom lens. The image is anachronistic, but I find it telling.[47] The only clear parallel that I can be confident

James knew—and of course it is a major feature in the novel—is painting and its fascination with perspective. In that context, the technique of Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, which James likely saw in the National Gallery after it was hung there in 1890, provides a useful guide.[48]

Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors* (1533), National Gallery, London

The problem is that paintings don't actually move. And while many may try to portray movement, Holbein's painting does not.

Having barely started to understand the connection (in terms of point of view) that I describe in this section, I can only outline some thoughts, and I expect much more should be worked out.

Renaissance painting, of course, played extensively with perspective (cf. point of view), and Holbein's painting is famous for its use of an anamorphosis, the shape at the lower center of this painting. To make out that it is a skull, the viewer has to stand at the edge of the frame and look sideways at the painting…which simultaneously distorts the rest of the painting—or, depending on your point of view, throws it into correct perspective. The presence of the skull is a standard reminder of mortality even in the midst of worldly success; the related slogan is *et in arcadia ego*, "I am also in Arcadia": the synonym for a pastoral paradise is not truly a celestial Eden but a fallen earthly place of mortality and decay. Moreover, despite its use in Holbein's worldly image, the theme is typically applied to rural/pastoral settings and dallying young lovers.

James claims,[49] of course, that this motif (which has qualities of *carpe diem*, *ubi sunt* and *memento mori*;(I suppose they are mirrors of each other), is the central theme of the novel, as set forth by Strether to Bilham in Gloriani's garden. That aside, we can look at the various points of view I outlined above as coming from a special kind of omniscient narrator, with specific rules. The first rule is that Strether is always present. A second is that most of the point of view will be via Strether's thoughts and feelings, though sometimes the narrator may be able to articulate feelings of which Strether is not conscious. A third rule is that the narrator, without ever having Strether leave the scene, may *very briefly* (a few words, as we saw above) comment on the action, either via a momentary point of view of another character or with a detached observer's judgment.

The reason I like the image of a hand-held movie camera is that, like our narrator, it both editorializes and has unavoidable boundaries. We see everything through the camera lens, or rather through the eye of the cameraperson who is pointing the lens, and we are always aware of that person. (Whenever I see dangerous footage, especially in documentaries, such as scenes of skydiving, I think about the person who is filming the action.) In normal filmmaking (at least for films with decent budgets), scenes are shot multiple times and from different angles, and later different bits are spliced together. Thus, in a dialogue, the screen image may move back and forth between the faces of the speakers, but we usually see any given moment over the shoulder and from behind the other speaker.

My conceit here is that James's scenes are "shot" non-stop, and the photographer must concentrate on holding the camera steady while accurately capturing the scene. Moving the camera to another character runs risks and must be done rarely and with great care. At the same time, if we add the image of a zoom lens and throw in some filters, the camera need not be positioned close to Strether but can do close-ups as needed. In the scene when Strether is sitting alone at the Cheval Blanc, the camera can do close-ups of his face as well as move around the scene and pan backwards and forwards to pick up the boat in the river and the people in it, now unidentifiable, now recognizable.

As I read this scene for the first time (but having listened to the recording and hence knowing generally what was to come) I kept thinking of the Pastorella episode in Book VI *The Faerie Queene*, in which a pastoral paradise seems to the reader an eternal, glorious Eden until it is suddenly razed by a band of marauding brigands.[50] That action is Spenser's version of the anamorphic skull in Holbein's painting. James captures a similar effect with the long rural build-up—framed by his memories of the Lambinet painting[51]--of Strether's day in the country, a radical break with the urban domination of the rest of the novel. The twist in James is that Strether does not feel betrayed by the truth but by the fact that the truth was kept from him. Indeed, he has come full circle on sexual matters since he left the U.S.: before meeting Chad in Paris, his expectation is that any sexual liaison would be corrupting, and he—like the reader—misinterprets "virtuous attachment" to mean chaste as opposed to loving, devoted, sublime. By the river scene, Strether is able to feel compassion for lovers like Chad and Mme de Vionnet, who cannot marry even if they want to.

I asked a version of this question earlier: to what degree would James's readers need to go through Strether's education—that is, to what degree would his readers assume that lack of unmarried chastity meant corruption and sin? If they *did* share Strether's opening assumption, then the novel manipulates their education in a similar way to Milton's seduction of readers into empathizing with Satan and thereby replicating the Original Sin of Adam and Eve.

It might be possible to apply a similar reading via a motif that James uses throughout the novel both literally and metaphorically: theater, and more generally, performance. The stage has rigid boundaries, we don't get to see what is in the wings, blocking can shape our perspective to events and dialogue, asides can interrupt the action briefly (but to set us straight), secrets are held and disclosed, and actors' technique can send silent messages and feelings to the audience.[52]

I will end these speculations here, hoping it is a useful start but frustrated that it does not yet seem enough to explain the shifting points of view in the novel.

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[1] All references to the novel are to the 1963 Norton Critical Edition that uses the 1909 text from the collected works, which James reviewed for publication. To help readers find citations in their own educations, I am both attaching a searchable Word file (my source for copying and pasting quotations into this commentary) to this web page and, when I identify a citation, listing Book number (of 12), chapter number within that Book, sequential chapter number (of 36) within the novel as a whole, and the page number. (For example, II.1/4.51 = Book II, chapter 2 in Book II, chapter 4 overall within the novel, and p. 51 of the 1963 Norton Critical Edition.)

[2] Obvious caveats: Aside from having no memories of other James writing with which to contrast this novel, I have read little secondary information on James, nor am I well versed in point-of-view theory. In keeping with my motivation for setting up my web site several months ago, however, I publish this commentary, with its limitations, on my web site as an outlet for my thoughts, regardless of whether anyone reads them. In this case, it is also salutary for me to re-capture academic writing skills that have largely lain dormant for many, many years. Of course I also hope that the content will interest some people, and that a fresh reading may reveal dimensions of the text that get lost when one knows a lot.

[3] I wonder whether this stress was encouraged by the New Criticism in which, as I note later, I was steeped as an undergraduate English major.

[4] This may be a function of the passage of time: perhaps I don't identify with or greatly care about any of the characters merely because they are alien to my experiences and interests a century after James wrote the novel.

[5] A prime example: perhaps before I even started classes this time—maybe even to help me decide whether to return to graduate study—I visited a Berkeley eighteenth-century specialist whom I had never met, Gardner Stout, to discuss with him a long paper on Swift that I had written five years earlier and for which I had received a B- (the grad school grade that says, "this is a very bad paper but I don't quite have the guts to give you what in grad school would be a failing grade"). Gardner generously offered to read the paper, and later told me he found it the most committed graduate paper he had ever read. Make what you will of this, but you may understand my confusion at exactly what to do next. I had chosen eighteenth century mainly because that was Fussell's specialty when I studied with him. Now—I don't remember how—I decided to try Renaissance study, even though it meant I would almost be starting from scratch.

[6] I first encountered this in *Surprised by Sin (*Berkeley, 1971), a book-length analysis of *Paradise Lost*. . Fish's promulgation of reader response criticism counsels against "correcting" a first impression as though your first reading were wrong and you need to change it to the "right" answer." Instead, Fish urges, authors intrinsically toy with and violate reader expectations, and we should accept our first impression but later reflect on how second and further impressions vary from it (and each other)—and what such variations reveal about what the author is really doing, how he or she is manipulating readers. For instance, Fish argues that the rhetorical movement of *Paradise Lost* deliberately lures readers into recapitulating the primal sin—for example, at least in the earlier Books, by admiring Satan's seeming grandeur— to show their ongoing complicity in humankind's fall.

I have consistently found that it pays to ask the kind of question Fish raises, at least of good writers, before assuming a writer (or the reader) has simply goofed. While at any given moment a reader-response (or any) approach can be extravagant or forced, in my experience Fish's technique works well a great deal of the time. And even when overdone (assuming we could agree on that definition) I have found it offering intriguing hints to understanding that would not occur to me any other way.

In the spirit of historical criticism, I would note that the technique was apt in its time and the place I encountered it, the early 70s in Northern California, when I (a single parent insecure about my legitimacy in that role), like many others, was trying to develop sensitivity about who I "really" was and what feelings and responses to life were legitimate.

[7] *The Poetry of the Faerie Queene*, Princeton, 1967. I did study with Alpers but never with Rabkin, Booth Fish or Crews, though I got to meet them.

[8] Latest edition: University of Chicago, Press, 2003. Good parodies are highly educational, for you must know what is being parodied. The help prepare for my MA orals, I read *1066 and All That* (latest edition: Methuen, 2006).

[9] Starting with his *Sir Walter Ralegh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles*, New Haven and London, 1973.

[10] Perhaps in the spirit of jock-sniffing, I have found myself proud of his career successes. To me he was always generous, kind and supportive, and I have often felt I let him and other mentors down by not succeeding in academia—though while I love teaching, I am not sure how ultimately enriching such a life in all its dimensions would actually have been for me.

[11] I threw out hundreds of pages of draft (sometimes saving quotations or paragraphs I liked so that I could staple them to new drafts—this was, of course, pre-word processing), and then one day, after maybe two years, maybe less, maybe more, of frustration, got the feel for what was required and wrote the entire dissertation in 6 weeks. This long confusion followed by a kind of indefinable epiphany was a much more troublesome version of how one day, some weeks into plane geometry in high school, I suddenly, viscerally understood what a theorem was about and coasted in the course the rest of the year.

[12] **http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=8942**.

[13] For example, one may believe in the legitimacy of civil disobedience for the "right" causes (i.e., those one supports) but recognize that others may justify civil disobedience for "wrong" ones (those, of course, to which one objects), as in the use of sit-ins to further racial justice vs. their use to block entry to abortion clinics. As this example suggests, I would note that for me, ethics and politics should coincide; of course they almost never do. This kind of attitude eventually also made me lose interest in critical theory as a discipline and instead find value in a wide range of approaches to literature (and life) without worrying about how well they fit together as a system.

[14] For those interested further in subtleties about nineteenth-century realism, Walton has more to say in the remaining pages of her opening chapter. She also makes some interesting related observations not directly relevant to my focus here but which echo topics that have arisen in our CIS discussion group.

- Reviewing Trollope, James "associates 'common life' with vulgarity, an association which suggests that for him, only an aristocratic or genteel 'reality' is acceptably 'real.'" [18] He is "always emphatic in his assertion that the novel has no 'conscious moral purpose….' However, the moralism he disclaims is apparent in his disapproval of excessive treatments of 'man's carnal side' because he believes that any excess unbalances the picture of 'life'… It should be noted that James's very specific and rather (at least to the modern mind) squeamish notions of the *acceptably* 'real' are individual to him and are not shared by all Realist theorists." [19]
- Walton addresses James's personal aristocratic bent: "Although James's own fictional works tend to be rather selective or 'aristocratic' in the nature of their subjects, they do represent an attempt, as James professes, to mirror 'life'; they are seemingly detailed and objective, promise closure, and convey the belief that what can be seen can be articulated and known…. If Realism is an inherently slippery concept, it is also a rather unstable concept, even by traditional definitions, because it assumes that author and reader have a shared knowledge of 'truth' and 'reality,' and chooses to ignore the necessarily arbitrary nature of its own particular perception of 'life.' In its implicit assumption that 'truth' can be known and articulated by the author and then recognized by the discerning reader, Realism also gives rise to too many unaddressed questions…" [22]
- James reviewed Turgenev and Flaubert, writing that Turgenev's "own representations of character…are so strangely, fascinatingly particular, and yet they are so recognisably general, "[20] and criticizing the title character of *Madame Bovary* as non-realistic. [20]

[15] I have not read most of her book and cannot comment on how successful her approach may be, but for those interested in it, I include a copy of her chapter, "*The Ambassadors* and Feminine Reading." [pp. 101-119] She suggests a polarity between "masculine realism," which seeks a unifying, single meaning in the novel, and a "feminine" sensitivity which embraces multiple meanings, asking [103] "why the female characters have been largely ignored in Realist/humanist readings of this novel." [104] She notes:

> Generally, those studies of *The Ambassadors* which dwell, to some extent, on the female characters have sexist overtones…. David Robinson suggests that Strether pays for his moral education by forgoing his relations with women: 'He pays for the life of growth by relinquishing the human comfort of his relations with the women of the novel. Loneliness is the cost of Strether's self-reliance' (441)." [104]

Commenting on the novel's female characters, she writes:

> The text's women are marginalized in the criticism, just as they are in the text, because, from a Realist/humanist perspective, they generate manifest difficulties…. Women are used, like tools, as a means of seeing, or more precisely, of interpreting. But in this, they perform an integral function within the novel, for each major female character embodies a particular mode of reading. Although they also function as author figures, in this capacity they inspire a particular approach to the texts they create. As a result, their authorial roles become a further means of exemplifying their theoretical stance. Mrs Newsome is a proponent of Realist/humanist reading and represents the need for referentiality; Maria Gostrey is an intermediary figure who teaches Strether to decipher, but to decipher in a way which promotes misreadings; and Madame de Vionnet actually personifies the open text, which she then helps Strether to interpret plurally. Strether evolves through each woman's tutelage to the point where he too, ultimately, embraces multiplicity. [105]

Walton examines these principles in detail in succeeding pages. I find many of her comments intriguing but sometimes problematic. Perhaps this is because I am not versed in the latest critical theories about people as texts (though I like the notion of "reading" and "misreading" them) and confusion of language's

roles (e.g., “referentiality” and “reference”); or perhaps Walton really does stretch and strain her arguments.

She cites comments from other critics. Antony Easthope

> highlights the masculinist precepts of Realism: ‘Realism is masculinist... because it is a form of fetishism, that being an especially male prerogative...a masculine desire to disavow the lack of the Mother’s phallus by erecting an apparently self-sufficient (textual) reality in its place’ (139). This masculinism - even without its psychoanalytic trappings - is apparent in James’s writings. We have seen it at work in the author’s dismissal of Emma Bovary as a suitable subject for a novel, and the idea that women are inferior underpins James’s writings. [29]

Naomi Schor,

> [writing on] women in French Realist novels…draws attention to Realism’s exclusion of women as well as its need for them: ‘realism, far from excluding woman from the field of representation, draws its momentum from the representation of bound women, and that binding implicitly recognizes woman’s energy and the patriarchal order’s dependence on it for the production of Literature’ (144). She goes on to note that ‘Realism is that paradoxical moment in Western literature when representation can neither accommodate the Otherness of Woman nor exist without it’ (xi).” [30]

[16] I doubt I have enough interest (or fortitude) to provide answers beyond what I offer here.

[17] I noticed a single moment where I question whether this is true. In the first sentence of XII.4/35 (p. 332), the text says: “He was to delay no longer to re-establish communication with Chad, and we have just seen that he had spoken to Miss Gostrey of this intention on hearing from her of the young man’s absence.” This “reminder” (“we have just seen”) jars, as though it were put there as a jog to the reader’s memory during serialization and inadvertently retained for publication (although this chapter would be in the middle of the final serial installment). The narrator often refers to “we,” but I can remember no other locution quite like this.

[18] The most overqualified moment in the book—a triple axel, so to speak—is, I think, Miss Barrace’s reaction when Strether seems noncommittal to her description of him as a hero (emphasis added): “And then as he <u>seemed</u> <u>perhaps</u> <u>not quite</u> to take fire...” [X.1/25.265] This would also seem to be a moment when, as I shall be discussing, the point of view is not Strether’s.

[19] It is entertaining to compare Strether’s feeling towards Waymarsh here with his feelings in the opening pages of Book VIII.

[20] Does Strether’s name have any significance? <u>Long shot</u>: makes me think of “stretcher,” as in conveyance for an invalid or one who reaches out just beyond one’s grasp or one who drags something out.

[21] Careful comparison of their homes might contribute to this answer, as the text invites when referring to “the matters that marked Madame de Vionnet's apartment as something quite different from Miss Gostrey's little museum of bargains and from Chad's lovely home.” [VI.1/13.145]

[22] A typical reader-response answer would be: It will show us that as readers we are complicit in Strether’s mistakes. And that may well be true. To what extent does the reader reproduce Strether’s experience? To what extent do we know better, or learn faster than he?

[23] This text is also reproduced in the Norton Critical Edition, to which bracketed page numbers refer. I have attached to this web page a PDF of the relevant pages from Lubbock’s book.

[24] Surely the narrator is male, though assuming a female narrator—perhaps an unspecific one, perhaps Maria Gostrey or someone like her—might produce unexpected rewards. If anyone wants to stagger down that path, I note that when Maria is recounting Mme de Vionnet’s history to Strether, the text calls her “Strether’s narrator.” [V.3/12.139]

[25] Cf. Walton: “as Yeazell points out, ‘however we may try to keep the minds of the narrator and his characters properly distinct, the language of the late novels themselves continually defeats us’ (12).” [Walton, 103]

[26] Other examples: the phrase “it had better be confessed at the outset” in this early, pregnant sentence: “He was burdened, poor Strether—it had better be confessed at the outset—with the oddity of a double consciousness.” [I.1/1.18] In Notre Dame, when Strether has not yet recognized Mme de Vionnet, the narrator comments: “Strether's reading of such matters was, it must be owned, confused…” [VII.1/16.172] “Strether, with his head back and his eyes on the ceiling, seemed to lose himself…” [VI.3/15.168] In discussion between Strether and Mme. de Vionnet early in Book IX, the narrator, not Strether’s mind, I think, comments: “The moment in fact however passed, giving way to more present history…”

[IX.1/22.231] "And that he [Strether] was still not neglecting her [Maria] will appear from the fact that he was with her again at the same hour on the very morrow…" [XI.2/29.290] In reference to Strether's country outing inspired by the Lambinet painting: "The adventure, it will be perceived, was modest." [XI.3/30.301]

[27] Other examples: When Strether and Maria are sparring over his claim that his Woollett identity is the "green cover" of his *Revue*, she twits him as duplicitous, and the narrator comments: "Still, she could in her own large grasp of the real condone it." [II.1/4.55] When Strether and Maria are first discussing Bilham, at one point we hear of Maria: "All her kindness wondered." [III.2/7.81]

[28] Like James at this point in his career, the narrator might be dictating to a typist, but I doubt it.

[29] I cannot make up my mind about exactly what is going on when, a few times, a descriptive narrative sentence (as opposed to dialogue) begins with a colloquial interjection, as when we are told of Bilham, during his conversation with Strether in Gloriani's garden, "Well, the young man took in the scene" [V.1/10.122], or, when Chad and Strether are discussing whom Sarah should blame, we read, "Ah but Chad, with his completer conception of the friendly, wouldn't quite have this!" [II.1/28.283]

[30] A similar moment occurs at the end of Book VII, when Maria (coyly) tells Strether, "'there's a service--possible for you to render--that I know, all the same, I shall think of'"; two lines later, the much-knowing narrator informs us, "This, in fine, however, she would never tell him." [VII.3/18.198] We may speculate about whether she comes closest in their final dialogue, and that it is Strether, not Gostrey, who is expected to speak the relevant words.

[31] A couple of pages earlier, a similar locution can be argued to be more ambiguous about its source: 'Waymarsh had been for a quarter of an hour exceptionally mute and distant, and something, or other--Strether was never to make out exactly what—…" [I.3/3.39] While I find it a stretch, it is possible to argue here that Strether himself is somehow reporting this information from the future. The later quote I have cited however, has even less feel of coming from Strether, in part because it refers to both Strether and Maria, the latter of whose entire life Strether cannot know—unless we are to take this passage as evidence that after the end of the novel the two of them at some point choose to spend a lifetime together.

[32] I'm reminded of John Marston's *Metamorphosis of Pygmalion's Image* (1596) in which the sculptor appears to be about to try to make love to his lifeless status only to have the narrator announce that whatever the reader has in mind is exactly what happens next.

[33] While the city functions as a kind of character in the novel, it is a relatively limited one, even though James stresses its importance in his preface. This may be one of the reasons I find little interest in the plot of the novel; Paris, as Flaubert uses it in *Sentimental Education*, has a much more diverse, often unsettling character than we find in *The Ambassadors*. James's characters seem to have no interest in, say, the poor, or even middle-class culture (if we are to classify them as middle-class, then there is still a parallel class of Parisians with whom they have nothing to do). Perhaps the frequent turmoil of the previous century alienates them and they seek a stable view of the city where the arts and intellectualism rule without reference to ordinary life and people. I don't get the impression, however, that James cares about such topics or invites us to reflect on them. The dangers of Paris come, as James mentions in his preface, from the city's temptations to stray from pre-defined, traditional morality and behavior—to stray from Woollett and Milrose.

I once commented that Strether's head is in Woollett and his loins in Paris, but I now think I gave Paris too much credit. Nonetheless; Strether's passions are certainly stimulated by Paris (or perhaps just by being out of the U.S.; we already have hints of such feelings during his time with Maria in England. The whole issue of how James treats sexuality intrigues me. Is he as circumlocutious about it in other writings? Is he ever franker? Is the indirect treatment here part of the novel's message? In Turgenev and Flaubert, both writing earlier and both admired by James, it is generally quite clear what is going on sexually. Thomas Hardy had already published novels with little ambiguity about sexuality.

Perhaps because I live in a time when sex outside marriage is taken for granted and frankness about sexual matters is common, I can't tell whether James's contemporaries would recognize a sexual reference behind his words. For example, apparently referring to women with whom Chad had affairs (as so often, I find it hard to be sure), Strether thinks, "The last had been longest in possession--in possession, that is, of whatever was left of the poor boy's finer mortality." [II.2/5.67] Is this a reference to venereal disease? I would expect not, or else the subject would be in the background as the novel proceeds—but the phraseology and reference to "mortality" raise the question in my mind.

[34] I don't have an answer to the interesting question of why James chose this form rather than "would" + an infinitive (as in "would remember" rather than "was to remember"). I would also be curious to know to what degree this locution was common at James's time, how much James is "creating" it as narrative norm, and whether its frequency is peculiar to *The Ambassadors*.

[35] This is another "prediction" that would be interesting to watch for on re-reading the novel. Another knowing foreshadowing occurs when Jim Pocock delivers a heartfelt and anguished statement of support for Chad, and the narrator reports: "There were things in this speech that Strether let pass for the time." [VIII.2/20.214] In a future reading perhaps I would understand exactly what he "let pass" and for how long. (Once again the narrator seems to be announcing a future independently of whatever is going on in Strether's mind in the present.)

[36] The next few sentences may be the only place the novel discusses Strether's ability in French (they also echo a recent CIS discussion about the role of language in determining one's personality: http://www.richardyanowitz.com/musingslangandpersonality.html):

> …the wonderful woman's overflow of surprise and amusement was wholly into French, which she struck him as speaking with an unprecedented command of idiomatic turns, but in which she got, as he might have said, somewhat away from him, taking all at once little brilliant jumps that he could but lamely match. The question of his own French had never come up for them; it was the one thing she wouldn't have permitted--it belonged, for a person who had been through much, to mere boredom; but the present result was odd, fairly veiling her identity, shifting her back into a mere voluble class or race to the intense audibility of which he was by this time inured. When she spoke the charming slightly strange English he best knew her by he seemed to feel her as a creature, among all the millions, with a language quite to herself, the real monopoly of a special shade of speech, beautifully easy for her, yet of a colour and a cadence that were both inimitable and matters of accident. [XI.4/31.311]

[37] A different confusion of tenses is: "He was to know afterwards, in the watches of the night, that nothing would have been more open to him than after a minute or two to propose to Chad to seek with him the refuge of the lobby." [III.2/7.91] Here, "was to know" is by now a familiar construction; but the second part of the sentence, as James chooses to construct it, complicates the movement of thought with a negative ("nothing") and can retain grammatical symmetry only by using the conditional perfect ("would have been"). James's reference two sentences later to Strether "stuck there like a schoolboy" may suggest that this convoluted mental-grammatical way of expression is like a school grammar exercise. It would seem to me that the sentence could be re-phrased something like, "Later he was to realize, in the watches of the night, that Chad would have welcomed going together to the lobby." I offer this re-phrasing only to underscore how unnecessarily complex Strether (not James) makes this (and most) thoughts. That, of course, is the point; my version loses everything that Strether's own rhetoric is meant to show us about him.

[38] Perhaps at the next reading I would find a more difficult passage.

[39] Compare Mme de Vionnet's "'No doubt, no doubt, no doubt'" when wrangling with Strether about how he judges her and Chad. [XII.2/33.321]

[40] For a briefer example of how James deliberately confuses antecedents, presumably to underscore blurring between characters, try to figure out to whom each "he" in these sentences refers: "Strether had left him [Waymarsh] there [Strether's bankers in the Rue Scribe] yesterday; he wanted to see the papers, and he had spent, by what his friend could make out, a succession of hours with the papers. He spoke of the establishment, with emphasis, as a post of superior observation; just as he spoke generally of his actual damnable doom as a device for hiding from him what was going on." [II.2/5.59] At one point, James has Strether himself momentarily unsure about an antecedent: discussing Chad's brokering a husband for Jeanne, Mme de Vionnet says, "'and he--our young friend--is really a combination. I quite adore him.'" To which Strether reacts as we might: "Strether just made sure. 'You mean your future son-in-law?'" as opposed, of course, to Chad. Regardless of whom she may actually have had in mind, Mme de Vionnet reassures us: "'Future if we all bring it off.'" [IX.1/22.238]

[41] One sentence, in the first chapter, relevant to such exploration is: "Nothing could have been odder than Strether's sense of himself as at that moment launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past and which was literally beginning there and then." [I.1/1.20] Also relevant, I think, is the frequency of conflicting or contrasting, juxtaposed ideas and words (e.g., "A personal relation was a relation only so long as people either perfectly understood or, better still, didn't care

if they didn't." [III.2/7.92]; Miss Barrace's striking Strether "as both antique and modern" [VI.2/14.156]), of a character's (usually Strether's) "yes…but no…" or "no…but yes…" balanced phraseology (e.g., Strether thinking "But something admonished him now that it was too late--unless indeed it were possibly too early" [VIII.3/21.223]; Chad saying to Strether, "One doesn't know quite what you mean by being in women's 'hands.' It's all so vague. One is when one isn't. One isn't when one is." [IV.1/8.100]), of phrases that suggest paradoxes (e.g., the oxymoron "knowing surprise" [V.2/11.133]; the passage:"He was Lambert Strether because he was on the cover, whereas it should have been, for anything like glory, that he was on the cover because he was Lambert Strether" [II.2/5.62]), of appositive phrases (e.g., "a hint to hospitality, a bid for an invitation" [II.2/5.62]), and the like.

[42] James's proliferation of adverbs, at least in this novel, intrigues me. Modern (late twentieth-century) advice that I've learned to follow when writing fiction is to avoid adverbs and instead seek a precise verb that will short-circuit need for the adverb.

[43] A similar borderline point of view, even less likely to reflect Strether's thinking at the moment and this time not driven by an adverb, occurs a couple of pages later when Maria Gostrey is described as having "an alertness of action that matched her quick intelligence." [I.3/3.35]

[44] The words echoed are "There we are," probably the most repeated expression in the novel (sometimes with a different pronoun or tense of "to be"—and at least once, "here" instead of "there"). At first glance, the meaning seems a fatalistic response to events, but I strongly suspect there is much more to it.

[45] Examples proliferate. Here are a few:

- In Strether's first conversation with Maria Gostrey: "'Oh I'm afraid of you!' he cheerfully pleaded." [I.1/1.25]
- In responding to Maria's "you efface yourself." Strether, referring to his *Revue*: "'With my name on the cover?' he lucidly objected." [II.1/4.50] (I suppose it's possible that Strether would himself reflect that he is being "lucid.")
- Maria, responding to Strether's explanation of the family relationships of Chad, Sarah, Jim and Mamie: "'Ah yes,' she tacitly replied…" [II.1/4.54]
- After a conversational ploy by Chad: "It was what Strether had rather bewilderedly to go to bed on." [IV.1/8.102]

[46] I have both read the novel and listened to a recording, sometimes one first, sometimes the other. Hard as the novel is to follow with my eyes, my ears have a tougher time. I kept replaying passages, sometimes going back more than a page (this while I was driving and handling a portable tape recorder). Finally I gave up and let myself pick up what I could. Here is what I found: I registered snippets much of the time and missed details much of the time. But at the most dramatic sections of the novel, my attention suddenly focused, at least for awhile. I still sometimes rewound segments where I *wanted* precise details, but I was no longer doing so obsessively. This suggests to me that the novel *does* have compelling plot moments, despite my boredom with its subjects, but that much of the novel is indeed an intellectual puzzle. I keep wondering where James found enough of an audience to make a living as an author, and whether he would have financial success today (aside from being the subject of numerous college classrooms).

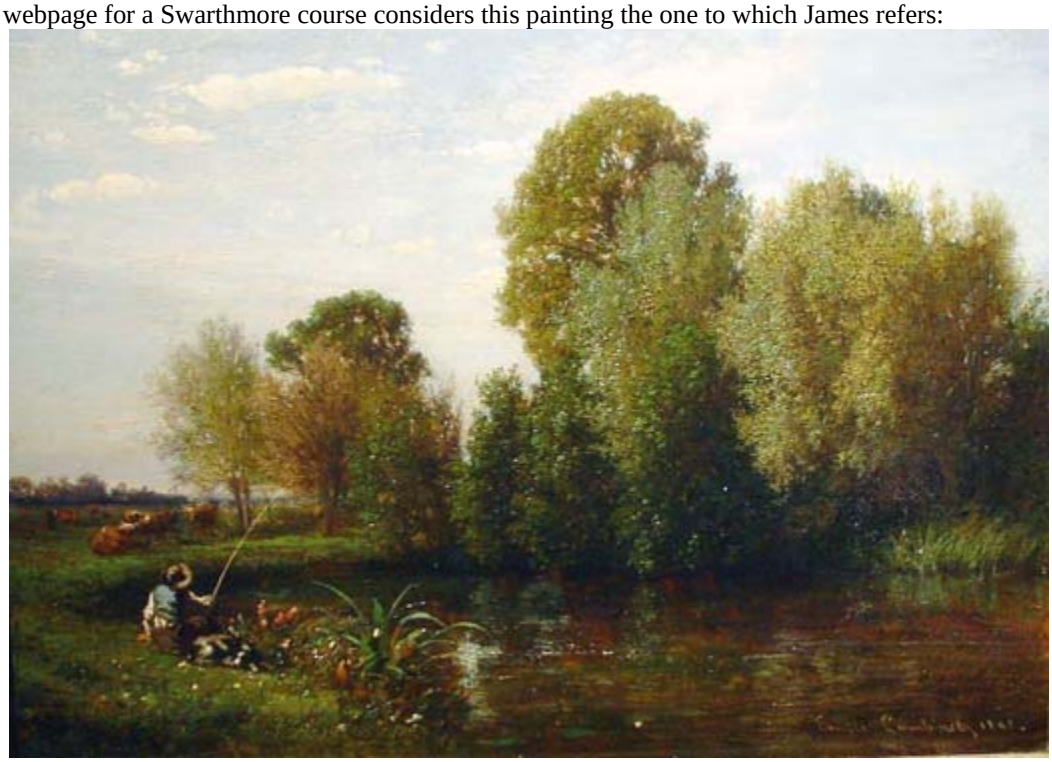
[47] I don't know what parallel technology or cultural phenomenon might have inspired James, and I am not assuming there was any Were I to expand this study, I would look into the history of photography to see if anything popped out. (I think also of the stereopticon and the magic lantern.) The still camera had been around for some decades—think of all the Civil War photos we have—and at least people with money commissioned portraits. I have the impression that photographic portrait studios were available to the public, but that cameras were not in general use until some decades after James wrote. The first motion pictures, still novelties, were being created around the time James was composing this novel (think of the Lumière brothers), but I have no reason to think he ever saw any of them. (Although, since he lived in London and Paris and moved with the intelligentsia, perhaps he did.) I doubt zoom lenses existed. Given the prevalence of professional portrait photography and the affluence of the class of people James depicts, it may be worth considering why photography does *not* appear in any way in the novel. It would seem ready-made for his thematic content and imagery, but James sticks to painting.

[48] Our book group took up this topic, and Adeline R. Tintner includes a persuasive chapter on the subject, "Holbein's *The Ambassadors:* A Pictorial Source for *The Ambassadors*," in *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes: Thirteen Artists at Work*, Baton Rouge and London, 1993.

[49] James makes this claim in the first chapter of his introduction to the novel. I say "claim" because (a) author's are notorious for misleading readers, and more importantly (b) authors are not always conscious of all that they are doing as they write.

[50] I might equally have thought of Shakespeare's forest settings, especially in Loves Labors Lost with its alienation from women, that are impossible contemplative retreats from the active life. But I did so only after writing this paragraph.

[51] A webpage for a Swarthmore course considers this painting the one to which James refers:



Emile Charles Lambinet
The Fishing Pool (1848), probably private collection

I captured this image from http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/kjohnso1/lambinet.jpg. The Swarhmore course page that points to it is http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/kjohnso1/henryjamesfall03.htm.

[52] I don't know anything about acting technique around 1900, and perhaps the nuances to which I refer here were unconveyed before the advent of Stanislavsky and his successors.