THE HISTORICAL EYE

The Texture of the Visual in Late James

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CHAPTER I

The Selfish Eye

Strether's Principles of Psychology

LAMBERT STRETHER of *The Ambassadors* has long been acknowledged as the prototypical Jamesian perceiver[1] and, indeed, attributes of Strether's vision are characteristic of seeing in James. By portraying Strether's perceptions as functional, James contextualizes his character both spatially and temporally: what Strether sees ties him to the physical world that surrounds him and to the past that he carries within him. At the same time, the active, interested, attentive nature of functional perception means that in the act of seeing, Strether shapes his world and his past. Visual perception is a means by which he struggles to survive in and over time. Understanding perception's role in the survival of Strether's self means understanding more fully how seeing can constitute a complex, active, analytic engagement with the environment. The very structure of Jamesian visual perception—that of a unified stream—illustrates the fullness and intricacy of Strether's interactions with his world.

Active and interested as Strether's visual efforts are, his seeing is restricted by both his immediate environment and

the history of his relations with his world. In attempting to see what he needs to see, Strether must contend not only with Chad's and Marie's visual manipulations, but also with his own perceptual past. Strether cannot eliminate these material, social, and temporal constraints, but, by learning and attending visually, he can limit them. I will analyze both Strether's environmental restrictions and the visual survival tactics with which he combats them below. In order to do so, however, we need to examine more closely the structure of Strether's seeing.

Yeazell outlines the reasons that Jamesian characters have seemed removed from earthy and unstructured processes like the "stream of consciousness":

> To a modern reader, long accustomed to the idea that much of consciousness operates below the level of language, the very look of a Jamesian meditation on the page suggests a mind in which the intellect is very much in control. For the unconscious does not, we suspect, obey the rules of grammar and of syntax, and James's men and women think in sentences which no more resemble the unpunctuated flow of words in Molly Bloom's final monologue or the bizarre strings of neologisms in *Finnegans Wake* than their sleeping habits resemble those of Joyce's rather drowsy characters. Though the Jamesian sentence strains, it does not break: no stream of consciousness, the critics all agree, flows through the pages of James's late fiction.[2]

Henry James does not write in what literary critics have defined as "stream of consciousness." Indeed, the psychologist who originated the phrase, William James,[3] argues that the full intricacy of the "stream of consciousness" can never be completely recreated. Nonetheless, William James consistently uses the arrangement of the grammatically correct sentence to represent the structure of the stream:

> As we take, in fact, a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is this different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest. (1:236)

The analogy between thoughts and sentences holds for fine, as well as gross, structures.

> There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. . . .
>
> We ought to say a feeling of *and,* a feeling of *if,* a feeling of *but,* and a feeling of *by,* quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold.* (1:238)

Although William James implies here that consciousness is structured like a language, he is not arguing that it is exclusively verbal. His point is that all mental activity is a stream: a continuous flow with resting-places. Contrary to those psychologists who maintain that all thought is linguistic, William James argues forcefully that the stream takes many forms: "Let *A* be some experience from which a number of thinkers start. Let Z be the practical conclusion rationally inferrible from it. One gets to the conclusion by one line, another by another; one follows a course of English, another of German, verbal imagery. With one, visual images predominate; with another, tactile" (1:260). Thus it makes sense to talk of a perceptual stream.

William James proposes the stream in its various forms as a correction to the associationist notion of a "chain" of distinct, atomistic ideas. He explicitly disagrees with Alexander Bain's associationist insistence that '"the stream of thought is not a continuous current, but a series of distinct ideas'" (1:237-38). Instead, James calls for "the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life" (1:246). And he argues that, not only are most of our thoughts vague *"feelings* of *tendency,"* but even the resting-places, the nouns, are continuous with the surrounding "water of consciousness" (1:246). "Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead" (1:246).

Strether's first viewing of Maria Gostrey's apartment illustrates this liquid continuity of the perceptual stream: "It was the innermost nook of the shrine—as brown as a pirate's cave. In the brownness were glints of gold; patches of purple were in the gloom; objects all that caught, through the muslin, with their high rarity, the light of the low windows. Nothing was clear about them but that they were precious" (21:119-20). What he sees is a continuous whole. There are resting-places (the glints, the patches, the objects), but they are immersed in their surroundings (in the brownness, the gloom, the light).

Rather than a series of discrete ideas, one replacing another, William James describes a changing flow in which perceptions "melt" into one another "like dissolving views" (1:269). Gazing at the crowded scene in Gloriani's garden, Strether finds that "he had just made out, in the now full picture, something and somebody else; another impression had been superimposed" (21:220). There is no break. Idea does not succeed idea, but impression flows over impression.

Often, Henry James uses atmosphere and light to convey this sense of a full, fluid perceptual context (a technique that, as Chapters 3 and 4 will show, is important to his landscapes as well): "The night was hot and heavy and the single lamp sufficient; the great flare of the lighted city, rising high, spending itself afar, played up from the Boulevard and, through the vague vista of the successive rooms, brought objects into view and added to their dignity" (22:210).

As this passage hints, the stream of perception flows toward discrimination. At Maria Gostrey's, Strether begins to discriminate certain objects more clearly, and eventually he is "bent, with neared glasses, over a group of articles on a small stand" (21:123). He still sees a continuous whole, yet his seeing now entails analysis. Associationism describes the mind as passively receiving simple units of sensation which build up into complex structures. For both William and Henry James, the procedure is exactly reversed. William James explains that "the 'simple impression' of Hume, the 'simple idea' of Locke are both abstractions, never realized in experience. Experience, from the very first, presents us with concreted objects, vaguely continuous with the rest of the world which envelops them in space and time, and potentially divisible into inward elements and parts. These objects we break asunder and reunite" **(1:61).**

William James says explicitly that this discrimination is perceptual. He argues that even conceptual divisions can be ultimately traced to perceptual discriminations. Yet those critics who recognize how the movement, the continuity, the "vagueness," to use William James's word, in Henry's sentences are the very terms of analysis and discrimination, do not realize that these complexities are often perceptual. Instead, these attributes are ascribed to a rational intellect that is seeking to *control* the raw material of perception. Because it is assumed that perception is simple and atomistic, what the eye sees and what the mind knows are regarded as qualitatively different. Stowell, for example, who uses the image of the *tabula rasa* to

characterize perception, argues that "consciousness" synthesizes discrete, raw precepts into an active, processive gestalt.[4] The idea that, for James, perceptions are the crude bits of material between which "thinking" discerns relations rests on the critical failure to recognize that both Jamesian thought and Jamesian perception are streams. "This way of taking things belongs with the philosophy that looks at the *data* of sense as something earth-born and servile, and the 'relating of them together' as something spiritual and free" (2:675).

By arguing that Strether's discriminations are perceptual, not "spiritual," I am not, of course, denying that James's characters have nonvisual thoughts.[5] My point is that, for James, perception is as finely tuned and complex as other mental processes. Indeed, perception often entails mental actions, like problem solving, that are assumed to be the work of "higher" intellectual faculties. To use William James's terms, Strether comes to his conclusion, he gets to Z, through a kind of visual thinking.

In order to understand how one could perform such sophisticated operations perceptually, we need to recognize the distinction William James makes between pure sensation and perception. For James, sensation's "function is that of mere *acquaintance* with a fact. Perception's function, on the other hand, is knowledge *about* a fact; and this knowledge admits of numberless degrees of complication" (2:652). Even the sensations of infancy are not completely raw and unprocessed, but are instead structured by the body. After the first days of life, we perceive, rather than sense; in adulthood, *"pure sensation"* is *"an abstraction"* (2:653). Thus, while he may seem to be seeing Maria Gostrey's apartment with what Ruskin calls "the innocence of the eye," that is, seeing "an arrangement of patches of different colours variously shaded" (15:27), Strether's perceptions are *not* innocent, as phrases like "brown as a pirate's cave" make clear. Comparatives point to a past, to experience.

Strether's perceptual flow is structured like a language precisely in that it is semiotic—what constitutes the visual stream is a chain of signifiers. Strether's visual images signify metonymically, contextually, historically; they are saturated with associations, associations that are themselves not only visual but also verbal, aural, and the like.

Taking as his starting point Derrida's "II n'y a pas de perception," John Carlos Rowe argues that "in the novels and tales, interpretations may masquerade as visual impressions, but there are no impressions that are not always already involved in complex semantic, social, and historical determinations.... There is no perception, no impression in the ocular or present sense possible in James's epistemology." What I am arguing is that "the textuality of 'consciousness' " that Rowe describes so accurately here ("complex semantic, social, and historical determinations") is traceable in the "ocular" perception that he denies. By de-emphasizing the physical, Rowe disembodies the Jamesian eye and I.[6]

The materiality of Jamesian perception is illustrated by the way that the visual provides the "language" of analysis in Maria Gostrey's apartment. What Strether finds in the sight of the down-to-earth entresol is a corrective to his puzzlement about Chad and Paris. This clarifying recognition takes the form of the rather blurry brown picture described above. Strether's picture of Maria's apartment is both the statement of, and the solution to, his predicament. He works the problem out visually. Strether sees Maria's apartment as, like Paris, and like Chad, at once confusing and alluring. It is a dark maze in which he can discriminate only the glint of precious objects. That is the problem. But the entresol is neither Paris nor Chad's troisieme. It is Maria's home. And therein lies the solution. For Strether soon sees that "after a full look at his hostess he knew none the less what most concerned him. The circle in which they stood together was warm with life, and

every question between them would live there as nowhere else" (21:120).

The sight of the apartment's owner transforms the scene into a full, warm circle—still intricate, but now accessible. Maria's presence in the midst of the maze brings the scene to order. That the entresol is her home explains both her and it. Strether's growing ability to distinguish the bibelots is not simply emblematic. Instead, his perception here is actually the next step in his understanding. What he literally sees in Maria's apartment both allows him to understand Maria herself (her taste, her expertise, her knowledge) and permits him to analyze Chad. The narrator tells us that Strether first "glanced once more at a bibelot or two, and everything sent him back" (back, that is, to the bibelots in Chad's apartment) (21:123). Maria's furnishings are a visual reminder of Chad's, and her homier setting becomes a means to understanding the owner of the "mystic troisieme." Rather than describing how Strether uses some higher faculty to synthesize crude perceptual building blocks into a complex whole, James shows the stream of Strether's perception as a process that moves toward discrimination and analysis.

Recognizing how the critical dichotomy between primitive perception and complex thought distorts the psychology of James's perceivers is important because of a related, more serious, distortion that underlies much James criticism. This is the mistaken opposition between True Reality, which is "seen" by the mind, and False Appearance, which is seen by the eye.[7] As his characters' reliance upon perception makes clear, James sets up no such antithesis. Reality can be known only through its appearance; characters know through seeing. Because both perception and its objects are complex, appearances can easily be oversimplified or misunderstood; nonetheless, what the eye sees and what the mind knows are not in opposition. At Gloriani's garden party, Strether sees the great

artist as "a fine worn handsome face, a face that was like an open letter in a foreign tongue. With his genius in his eyes, his manners on his lips, his long career behind him and his honours and rewards all round, the great artist, in the course of a single sustained look and a few words of delight at receiving him, affected our friend as a dazzling prodigy of type" (21:196). The fact that Strether has not fully learned the visual language in which Gloriani's self is written does not mean that appearances lie. His perception, informed by past viewings of Gloriani's work, is an intricate mix of the known and the unknown. As George Eliot argues in *Adam Bede,* "Nature has her language, and she is not unveracious; but we don't know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet, and in a hasty reading we may happen to extract the very opposite of her real meaning."[8] And Strether recognizes that Gloriani's eyes *are* "the penetrating radiance, as the communication of the illustrious spirit itself" (21:197).

Like James's, Eliot's environments are complexly social. Yet the differences between the ways the two writers describe their characters' visual relations with those social environments are telling. Comparing Eliot's and James's practices illustrates the analytic nature of the Jamesian perceptual stream. Midway through M*iddlemarch,* after a long night of watching, Dorothea awakens to the realization that her crisis is shared by three others (Will, Rosamund, and Lydgate) and is brought to a question.

> "What should I do—how should I act now, this very day, if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three?"
>
> It had taken long for her to come to that question, and there was light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was man with a bundle on his back

> and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.
>
> What she would resolve to do that day did not yet seem quite clear, but something that she could achieve stirred her as with an approaching murmur which would soon gather distinctness.[9]

Clearly what Dorothea sees in this famous scene is determined in part by what she thinks and knows. As many Eliot critics have observed, she has often looked out this window before, but now, for the first time, she notices human figures in the scene. Similarly, James marks Strether's growing knowledge by having him return to the various Parisian apartments. But despite the selective activity implicit in Dorothea's focus on the human figures, her perception remains largely static. She has had her realization before she looks out the window, and she turns back into the room with no new knowledge. What she sees reflects, but does not affect, her thoughts. The three people that she sees are emphatically *not* Will, Rosamund, and Lydgate because the scene is a symbol for her life, rather than a part of it. The man bearing a bundle, and the woman a child, the shepherd and the dog, are emblems for "labor and endurance." There is no *visual* interaction here between Dorothea and the world "outside the entrance-gates."[10]

Strether perceives more actively and processively. What he sees does not merely reflect a question arrived at or even a question answered. Instead, the answering of the question, the problem-solving process, takes place *in* the stream of Strether's perceptions. As we have already observed, his early analytic

picture of Maria Gostrey's apartment aids him in understanding Chad. Perceiving Maria's entresol for the second time, he confronts the problem of Maria herself. Strether distinguishes the fact that Marie de Vionnet has been there, and he works his way to a realization of the guilty association between the two women. "He was sure within a minute that something had happened; it was so in the air of the rich little room that he had scarcely to name his thought. Softly lighted, the whole colour of the place, with its vague values, was in cool fusion—an effect that made the visitor stand for a little agaze. It was as if in doing so now he had felt a recent presence" (22:295).

The room is no longer intricate and varied. Strether now sees it as uniformly lit and open to easy understanding. He solves the problem of how to judge Maria Gostrey by looking at her apartment and seeing in the "cool fusion" and "vague values" her tie to the other woman. The two phrases are pointed allusions to Marie de Vionnet. In descriptions of her apartment, colors are repeatedly referred to as "cool," and the painterly term "values" is used explicitly. And, of course, the complicity of the two women has effected a guilty sort of fusion between them, just as Maria's values have been, at best, "vague"—she has silently consented to Strether's deception.

Strether does not know all of these things before he arrives. His understanding comes *as* he composes his visual picture of the entresol. Indeed, his visual conclusion is so vivid that verbal expression becomes secondary: "He had scarcely to name his thought." The moment of perception is a moment of engagement with the problems of life. Strether's role as a representative Jamesian perceiver marks him not as a passionless intellect who stands apart and waits for impressions, but as an active, interested self who survives by perceiving.

Strether survives in his world by seeing what he needs to see. His perceptual pictures are always self-interested—even when they seem self-sacrificing. For example, he constructs a

series of pictures of Marie de Vionnet that portray a lady in mild, romantic distress and thus in need of noble, yet limited, "saving." These pictures permit Strether to become safely, restrictedly, involved with her. Strether's need to think of himself as noble does not prevent him from acting nobly. His selfish eye is not the mark of a villain because it is not an organ peculiar to Strether. He does not rationally decide to see as he does—indeed, he is usually not aware of the way his interests direct his perceptions. Instead, Strether's visual pictures are structured by the very conditions of seeing. To discover that what the Jamesian eye sees is always in the interest of the Jamesian "I," is not to uncover secret evil in James's protagonists. In the Notes to *The Sense of the Past,* James describes Ralph Pendrel as "all selfishly" asking another for help and then goes on to say: "Immense and interesting to show him as profiting by her assistance without his being thereby mean or abject or heartless" (26:328, 338). Our understanding of Strether's self-interested seeing needs to be equally "immense."

We need also to understand that Strether cannot completely determine what he sees. His self-interested activity is immediately limited by what Hocks calls the " 'outside' determinations" of his environment. Although from the very start he selects and arranges in the act of seeing, Strether's visual surroundings are often designed by others.[11] For example, Chad offers Strether a series of charming, nonthreatening visual substitutes for himself. When he does arrange for Strether to see him, Chad repeatedly manages to stand above the seated older man. The surprise appearance at the theatre is an obvious example of Chad's manipulations of the conditions of perception. This staged show ensures that Strether will see, not "Chad," the wayward boy whom he expects to chastise, but the handsome Europeanized man who towers over him.

As Strether's inability to recognize Chad indicates, past interactions with his environment also restrict what he sees. Wil-

Ham James calls "inveterate . . . our habit of not attending to sensations as subjective, facts, but simply using them as stepping-stones to pass over to the recognition of realities whose presence they reveal" (1:225). Our perceptual pasts, in other words, provide us with useful shortcuts: "Our hemispheres, in particular, are given us in order that records of our private past experience may co-operate in the reaction" (2:747). Early in the novel, Strether finds himself in the Luxembourg Gardens because the "current of association" has floated him there (21:90). Knowing only that he will "recognise as soon as see it the best place of all" to read his American letters, Strether, without consciously realizing it, is guided by visual clues along *Chad's* route through Paris (21:78-79). Similarly, Strether's perception of Madame de Vionnet during his last visit to the Rue de Bellechasse is one in which records of all of his past viewings of Marie and her apartment "co-operate."[12]

> The associations of the place, all felt again; the gleam here and there, in the subdued light, of glass and gilt and parquet, with the quietness of her own note as the centre ...he was sure in a moment that, whatever he should find he had come for, it wouldn't be for an impression that had previously failed him.... She might intend what she would, but this was beyond anything she could intend, with things from far back—tyrannies of history, facts of type, values, as the painters said, of expression-all working for her and giving her the supreme chance ... to be natural and simple. (22:275-76)

Unsettled by the day in the country, Strether reassures himself that he will see nothing new. He is unwittingly correct. Although Strether does not achieve his hoped-for "natural and simple" picture of Marie, the "mixed" perception of her which ends this meeting points to an earlier sight (22:284). He recognizes "the refined disguised suppressed passion" (22:131) that he detected in her face on his last visit, sees again the restless,

desperate woman he saw in the country, perceives that Marie is afraid for her life.

Such perceptual "records" are often strong enough to take the form of mental images or preperceptions. "When, however, sensorial attention is at its height, it is impossible to tell how much of the percept comes from without and how much from within; but if we find that the *preparation* we make for it always partly consists of the creation of an imaginary duplicate of the object in the mind, which shall stand ready to receive the outward impression as if in a matrix, that will be quite enough to establish the point in dispute" (1:415). Perhaps the clearest illustration of Strether's tendency to preperceive comes when he ascends the stairs of Chad's apartment for his final visit. As he climbs, Strether begins to think about Chad's evening. He starts with nonvisual supposings, but *before* he reaches Chad's door, Strether literally sees before him an image of the apartment.

> He had been for a week intensely away, away to a distance and alone; but he was more back than ever, and the attitude in which Strether had surprised him was something more than a return—it was clearly a conscious surrender. He had arrived but an hour before, from London, from Lucerne, from Homburg, from no matter where—though the visitor's fancy, on the staircase, liked to fill it out; and after a bath, a talk with Baptiste and a supper of light cold clever French things, which one could see the remains of there in the circle of the lamp, pretty and ultra-Parisian, he had come into the air again for a smoke, was occupied at the moment of Strether's approach in what might have been called taking up his life afresh. (22:305-6)

William James states, "Each present brain-state is a record in which the eye of Omniscience might read all the foregone history of its owner" (1:228). We can read Strether's visual history in the components of this preperceptive image: the past

sight of Little Bilham smoking on the balcony; the breakfast that resulted, a "repast of so wise a savour" (21:113); his midnight exposure to the "soft circle" of Chad's "single lamp" (22:209-10); his early perceptions of the circle, "warm with life" (21:120) in Maria's entresol. But Chad restlessly refuses to hold still and conform to Strether's idealized image of him as the perfect Parisian. He guides Strether out of the apartment, deliberately removing himself from the setting that has, in the past, fostered just such images. Chad comes down from the superior heights of the "mystic troisieme," and his low nature becomes visually obvious: "Chad had thrown back his light coat and thrust each of his thumbs into an armhole of his waistcoat; in which position his fingers played up and down" (22:316). Once in the street, Chad turns into a caricature of the American Advertising Man.[13]

Strether's anticipatory image on the stairs is unusual. Generally, rather than describing Strether's preperceptions as such, James shows how these visual preparations order present sights. As William James explains:

> The *preperception,* as Mr. Lewes calls it, is half of the perception of the looked-for thing.
>
> It is for this reason that men have no eyes but for those aspects of things which they have already been taught to discern.... In short, *the only things which we commonly see are those which we preperceive,* and the only things which we preperceive are those which have been labelled for us, and the labels stamped into our mind. If we lost our stock of labels we should be intellectually lost in the midst of the world. (i:4i9-2o)[14]

The past intrudes upon and organizes the present. For example, Strether's first perception of Marie de Vionnet is structured by Woollett sights and labels: "She was dressed in black, but in black that struck him as light and transparent; she was exceedingly fair, and, though she was as markedly slim, her face

had a roundness, with eyes far apart and a little strange. Her smile was natural and dim; her hat not extravagant; he had only perhaps a sense of the clink, beneath her fine black sleeves, of more gold bracelets and bangles than he had ever seen a lady wear" (21:210). Madame de Vionnet's black strikes Strether as light and transparent because Mrs. Newsome's is dark and opaque. Similarly, he perceives her hat as, in a negation of Woollett expectations, "not extravagant." That she wears "more gold bracelets and bangles than he has ever seen a lady wear" implies that, while her jewelry is not that of a Woollett lady, Strether cannot categorize her as "not a lady." All of these discriminations take place in the very act of perception.

William James argues that the associationist notion that we hold the separate "ideas" of "m" and "n" next to one another in our minds and compare them, that the past is simply a point of objective comparison for the present, is mistaken. Instead, we experience "n" in light of our past experiences of "m." The *"pure* idea of V is *never in the mind at all,* when 'm' has once gone before; and .. . the feeling [of] *'n-different-from-m'* is itself an absolutely unique pulse of thought" (1:472-73). When, in the opening scene of the novel, Strether sees the Chester city wall, he does not contrast this present perception with his original sight of the wall. Instead, what he sees is "enriched" by what he saw: "Too deep almost for words was the delight of these things to Strether; yet as deeply mixed with it were certain images of his inward picture" (21:16). In the garden of the Tuileries, his past perceptions lead him to see, not a blank space, but an "irremediable void" where the palace once stood (21:79).

Despite the past's hold over what is seen, the present does appear to have some power. Part of Strether's perceptual freedom comes from his capacity to learn. For example, he learns to modify his Woollett category of "lady" in the face of Marie de Vionnet's appearance. And Strether acquires new labels as well. He begins by being unable to pick the *femmes du monde* out of the crowd at Gloriani's, but learns to recognize Madame de Vionnet at Chad's as belonging to that category. Yet Strether lacks the ability to entirely free himself of old perceptual categories, as this very perception of Marie as *zfemme du monde* graphically illustrates.[15] Because his past training will not permit Strether to admire Marie's sexuality, he focuses on her shoulder, arms, neck, and head. His comparison of this perception to that of "a goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud, or . . . a sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge" confirms the past's control over what Strether sees (21:27c).[16]

A more limited, and yet potentially more liberating, source of perceptual freedom lies in Strether's power of attention, an activity William James defines as "the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought" (1:381-82). When Strether returns to Paris and sees yellow books in a store window, he is inevitably afFected by the fact that he saw them thirty years ago. The associative mechanism causes his past perceptions to condition his present ones, but, at the same time, Strether's present perception does not replicate his past ones. Free will is located in the perceptual nexus between past and present. In his youth the books seemed to him symbols of his plans for greatness. Now they appear as signs of the loss of that youth, an effect that he intensifies by focusing on the glass that shields them. Strether *attends:* He forbids himself the purchase of any books, ensuring that he will see them with "hungry gazes through clear plates behind which lemon-coloured volumes were as fresh as fruit on the tree" (21:86). James makes the perceiver's share in perception explicit by showing Strether seeing, not books, but books behind a window. Strether makes sure that he perceives the pleasures of Paris through a clear, but clearly present, barrier.[17] His ability to freely select may be circumscribed, but it exists, and

he acts upon it. Strether's characteristic turning away, his directing his vision toward safe objects (in moments of stress he repeatedly turns to look at his American letters or watch), are examples of the limited but powerful faculty that William James calls "mental spontaneity." *"My experience is what I agree to attend to.* Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind-without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word" (1:380-81).

This spontaneous activity is a constant in Henry James's descriptions of visual perception. When Strether needs to be able to think of Marie de Vionnet as a romantic lady in distress, he creates a picture of her apartment that suits his purposes. Chad has prepared for this scene by praising Marie, carrying Strether off to the visit, and leaving the two alone. But Strether's own participation is evident in the description of the apartment. He works hard at what he sees: "he found himself making out, as a background of the occupant"; "he guessed"; "his attention took them all tenderly into account"; "he quite made up his mind" (21:244-45). Although he conjectures that the apartment "went further back" (21:244), Strether persists in seeing it as belonging to the Romantic period so that he can select and arrange its details into a High Romantic picture: "He would have answered for it at the end of a quarter of an hour that some of the glass cases contained swords and epaulettes of ancient colonels and generals; medals and orders once pinned over hearts that had long since ceased to beat; snuff-boxes bestowed on ministers and envoys; copies of works presented with inscriptions, by authors now classic" (21:246).

He can even discern the inscriptions! Once Strether can see Marie de Vionnet ensconced in a heroic, historic setting, he can believe that she is a lady in mild distress and he, a self-sacrificing knight. The picture he creates permits him to become involved with her in a noble, safe way. Of course, Marie has helped to make sure that this picture was available to Strether. Reversing Chad's visual ploy of standing above Strether, she even seats herself on the apartment's one anomalously modern chair so that he can see her in the lowly position of supplicant. "Then it was that he saw how she had decidedly come all the way; and there accompanied it an extraordinary sense of her raising from somewhere below him her beautiful suppliant eyes. He might have been perched at his door-step or at his window and she standing in the road" (21:248). As Strether's analogies indicate, Marie's pose helps him to direct his associations. The scene becomes familiar—an illustration to a melodramatic romance.[18]

This interaction between arranged environment and attentive eye is explicit in the picture of Marie de Vionnet that she and Strether create together at Notre-Dame. Immediately following Strether's declaration to Little Bilham that if Chad gives up Marie de Vionnet, he "ought to be ashamed of himself" (21:286), Strether's visit to the church is described. His betrayal of Woollett values, together with his visual "habit . . . of watching a fellow visitant" and seeing his or her posture as evidence of the penitence—and absolution—that he himself half-consciously desires, leads him to attend to the "lurking" female figure (22:6, 8). Bringing to bear an array of artistic associations, he perceives the figure he has selected to perceive as a heroine. When Marie turns to face Strether, she offers him the materials with which to complete the picture he has prepared himself to see:

> He confessed the extent of his feeling, though she left the object vague; and he was struck with the tact, the taste of her vagueness, which simply took for granted in him a sense of beautiful things. *He was conscious of how much it was affected,* this sense, by something subdued and discreet in *the w.ry she had arranged herself for her special object* and her morning walk—*he believed her to have come*

> *on foot; the way her slightly thicker veil was drawn—a mere touch, hut everything;* the *composed* gravity of her dress, in which, here and there, a dull wine-colour seemed to gleam faintly through black; the *charming discretion* of her small compact head; *the quiet note,* as she sat, of her folded, grey-gloved hands. (22:8-9; italics mine)

They manage the same picture again in Mrs. Pocock's salon—"She looked much as she had looked to him that morning at Notre Dame; he noted in fact the suggestive sameness of her discreet and delicate dress"—although this is certainly not what Sarah sees (22:93). A "discreet and delicate" portrait of Marie de Vionnet neither fits her preperceptions nor serves her purposes.

Attention's ability to overcome the past's mechanical structuring of the present is also active in the workings of memory. By remembering, Strether prevents his past from automatically determining his future. Such a statement seems paradoxical only because of confused or casual notions about how memory works. William James explains:

> Memory proper . . . *is the knowledge of an event, or fact,* of which meantime we have not been thinking, *with the additional consciousness that we have thought or experienced it before....* And it is an assumption made by many writers that the revival of an image is all that is needed to constitute the memory of the original occurrence. But such a revival is obviously not a *memory,* whatever else it may be; it is simply a duplicate, a second event, having absolutely no connection with the first event except that it happens to resemble it.... No memory is involved in the mere fact of recurrence. (1:610-11)

Strether's recognition of the Lambinet in the French countryside is not the longed-for revival of a past image: "He never found himself wishing that the wheel of time would turn it up again, just as he had seen it in the maroon-coloured, skylighted inner shrine of Tremont Street" (22:246). The notion

that Hocks describes as central to both William James's pluralism and Henry James's later manner—"The same returns not, save to bring the different"—obtains here.[19] Strether remembers, rather than repeats, the past. "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 faraway hour: the dusty day in Boston, the background of the Fitchburg Depot, of the maroon-coloured sanctum, the special-green vision, the ridiculous price, the poplars, the willows, the rushes, the river, the sunny silvery sky, the shady woody horizon" (22:246). Rather than reexperiencing his Boston perceptions on the train, Strether analyzes the past into its essential "elements" and watches for the material with which to recompose a new version of the scene. His choice of a stop is precisely that: a choice. The visual memory of Tremont Street and the visual opportunity of his environs allow him to create his own French picture—"weather, air, light, colour, and his mood all favouring" (22:246).

In Rowe's words, Strether "recognizes the specular image of his own historical subjectivity";[20] he is the producer, as well as the product, of that historical self. The active, reciprocal interaction between organism and environment that William James describes exists in and over time; the world Strether visually sculpts for himself is a world in four dimensions. What Strether's perceptual freedom, limited though it may be, allows is James's narrative flexibility. The story of *The Ambassadors,* James tells us in his Preface, is the story of how a man comes to make a speech in a garden. Yet, rather than a plodding chronology of the events that, one by one, led to this event, we have *The Ambassadors,* the narrative of a character who *reflects on,* as well as reflects, his past.[21] Functionalism allows James to place his protagonist in an environment and within a personal history without locking either his character or his text into a literary determinism. "The business of my tale and

the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision," James states (2i:vi). Studying precisely what it is that Strether literally sees, examining the way the process of vision is enacted in the stream of visual perception, reveals how actively Strether engages in the struggle to shape his environment and ' self.

Notes

i. For example, Marianna Torgovnick's *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence, and Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), an anatomy of literary uses of the visual arts, uses *The Ambassadors* as its primary example of "perceptual" pictorialism.

2. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 17. Yeazell goes on to suggest that such intellectual control is "more precarious—and more hard-won—than might at first appear" (18).

3. Although William James is widely acknowledged to be the originator of this phrase, J. Gill Holland has claimed priority for G. H. Lewes in "George Henry Lewes and 'Stream of Consciousness': The First Use of the Term in English," *South Atlantic Review* 51 (January 1986): 31-39-

4. H. Peter Stowell, *Literary Impressionism, James and Chekhov* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 24-25. See also Judith Ryan, "The Vanishing Subject: Empirical Psychology and the Novel," *PMLA* 95 (1980), who describes Henry James's characters as making mental connections between their "often disparate and discontinuous sensory perceptions" (859). Ryan fails to recognize that the image of the stream characterizes the way sensations are actually *experienced,* not simply the way the mind perceives itself.

5. For an excellent discussion of the intricacies of Jamesian thought and language, see Yeazell's *Language and Knowledge.* Jamesian perception is, however, for Yeazell, simple: "Perception of sensuous correspondences is direct and immediate, but the world of the late novels does not allow of such easy connections among its parts" (41).

6. John Carlos Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions of Henry James* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 194, 202. What Rowe and Derrida term "perception" is closer to what William James calls "sensation."

7. See, for example, Daniel J. Schneider's chapter, "The Eye, Appearances, and Acting," 96-116, in *The Crystal Cage: Adventures of the Imagination in the Fiction of Henry James* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978). Schneider describes well James's characters' abilities to manipulate appearances, but mistakenly concludes that what the eye sees "is contrasted with the natural and with the invisible, the real, the *ding in sich"* (98). Both Richard A. Hocks's book, *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), and N. I. Bailey's short article, "Pragmatism in *The Ambassadors," Dalhousie Review* 53 (1973): 143-48, demonstrate that such formulations describe neither Henry's nor William's thought.

8. George Eliot, *Adam Bede,* Cabinet Edition, 2 vols. (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood, 1878-80), 1:229.

9. George Eliot, *Middlemarch,* Cabinet Edition, 3 vols. (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood, 1878-80), 3:392.

10. For an opposing reading, see Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), who argues that this landscape "makes possible a creative interaction between her mind and the world outside it" (154).

n. Hocks, *Henry James,* 177. Torgovnick also notes a number of Strether's visual arrangements, as well as others' attempts to arrange sights for him *{The Visual Arts,* 174-78).

12. See Hocks's comments on the "recognition scene" in the country: "Strether actively and radically meets the discovery; he enters into a reciprocal relation with it, grafting meaning while receiving in kind; he empties every possible insight about himself, his previous assumptions, the thoughts of the two lovers in having to deal with *him,* and even the imagined responses of those back at Paris, into it" *{Henry James,* 63).

13. On Chad and advertising, see William Greenslade, "The Power of Advertising: Chad Newsome and the Meaning of Paris in *The Ambassadors," ELH* 49 (Spring 1982): 99-122.

14. Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge,* makes a similar point, without recourse to William James: "Language creates the conditions under which perception is possible" (75).

15. In contrast, see Paul B. Armstrong, *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford* (Ith-

aca: Cornell University Press, 1987), who describes Strether's "bewilderment" at Chad's transformation as happily freeing him from old Woollett "categories" and "terms" (66-70). Bailey more accurately stresses the past's power.

16. This editing has been noted by a number of critics. Strether's most vivid perceptions of women throughout the novel tend to be focused on the upper halves of their bodies.

17. James makes the cultural context of this perception explicit in *The American Scene*, where the plate glass, which makes the books unobtainable objects of desire, appears as the agent and emblem of consumerism. See Chapter 3 of this volume.

18. See Viola Hopkins Winner, *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1970), 1 ff., on how James's own visual perceptions of the world were affected by his early viewings of illustrated books.

19. Hocks, *Henry James*, 86-89.

20. Rowe, *The Theoretical Dimensions*, 198.

21. As Hocks says in another context, "There is the same basic difference between [Henry] James's various 'principles' and his *Prefaces* in which they are presumed to reside, as between 'Lambert Strether journeys to Europe on behalf of Mrs. Newsome' and the opening chapters of *The Ambassadors" (Henry James*, 54).