HENRY JAMES AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL NOVEL

Being and seeing

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CHAPTER 2

The Ambassadors: *observation and interpretation ...passion and compassion*

i

Soon after his arrival in Paris, Lambert Strether finds himself sitting on a penny chair in the Luxembourg Gardens, mulling over his correspondence from Woollett and the complexities of his task, while Paris hangs before him, 'a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next.'* Such an image suggests the sort of challenge which *The Ambassadors* presents to the reader, except that the novel, for all its teasing intricacy, has both a delicately textured surface, and the energy and vitality of a living organism. Whether or not it is the 'best "all round"' of James's works is arguable, but it certainly is beautifully proportioned (see *The Art of the Novel,* pp. 308-9). It displays to great advantage the subtle articulation of his later, strongly philosophical method, for it dramatizes the evolution of an entire process of judging. It shows a new scheme *of* evaluation growing steadily out of a willingness to respond and assimilate, together with an equally active willingness to set aside accepted conventions and to pass beyond established opinions - yet without losing sight of the original background and its unique strengths. There is discovery as much through rediscovering the familiar as through fresh initiations. All these characteristics of the novel invite a comprehensive analysis in phenomenological terms, one which will extend and complement the interpretation of *What Maisie Knew* in relation to the practice of the phenomenological reduction. At the same time, it is possible to make a definite technical

[1] *The Ambassadors* is printed as Vols. 21 and 22 of the New York edition of the novels (1909; rpt. 1971). See Vol. 21, p. 89.

advance by showing that such phenomenological descriptions may be applied not only to the content, but also to the form, of James's later fiction. Innovative philosophy finds its fullest expression as carefully modulated story-telling.

As in the discussion of *What Maisie Knew,* the notion of the phenomenological reduction serves as the central pivot of the philosophical examination, although three specific features, which are closely identified with this approach, now assume a dominant role. These key features are the concept of the *epoche* (or the process of 'bracketing' all accustomed attitudes and reactions, so that the world may appear as pure phenomenon), the revelation of the structure of consciousness itself, and the function fulfilled by phenomenologically determined essences in the search for meaning. In the preceding assessment of Maisie's career, the emphasis falls (with some concluding reservations) on the radical creativity and energetic freedom of her vision; James challenges and reshapes an entire nexus of moral and social values by submitting them to her penetrating gaze. In the opening pages of the novel, Maisie's youth, inexperience and total ignorance of the established norms fit her ideally for realizing such a dramatic purpose. Yet *The Ambassadors* presents a different type of fictional and philosophical problem. In Strether the reader encounters a mature consciousness, for the Woollett editor has a lifetime's experience - albeit rather sparse - on which to draw. This suggests the practical difficulty of performing the phenomenological *epoche* in a single, all-embracing movement, and points towards the need for a more gradual, cumulative process. The pressing question becomes one of how an individual, who is steeped in a whole range of personal, social and cultural traditions, can arrive at a fresh and unprejudiced, yet valid and self-consistent, means of judging. How useful is the *epoche as* an analytical methodology?

In *Ideas,* Husserl engages in elaborate preparations for the change to the 'fundamental phenomenological outlook', yet his major preoccupation lies in the importance of 'bracketing' completely the *natural attitude* with its conveniently available system of references. However, in his late work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology,* a different methodological emphasis emerges. Husserl cautiously feels his way by a series of steps towards the achievement of the *epoche,* in the full awareness of the immense complexity of the task that confronts him. The advance is more circumspect because *The Crisis* is geared towards a definitely stated

goal: uncovering the rational faculty which Husserl believes to form the basis of all genuinely philosophical endeavour, and illustrating how the development of scientific practice in Europe has obscured the nature of man's penetrating intellectual capacity, and thus the quality of his striving for self-fulfilment. Husserl argues that 'what is clearly necessary... is that we *reflect back,* in a thorough *historical* and *critical* fashion, in order to provide, *before all decisions,* for a radical self-understanding : we must inquire back into what was originally and always sought in philosophy'.[2]

This historical concern, which is a vital aspect of *The Crisis,* brings to light the tension between the idea of objectivity, as postulated by the modern sciences, and ordinary, everyday modes of experiencing the world. So, Husserl progresses steadily towards a new formulation of the *epoche,* one which gives due weight to the problems presented by human existence in a non-scientific 'life-world' (pp. 135-7, 'So'-o,). He contends that this revised version 'corrects' the inadequacies of his previous experiments. However, he returns yet again to a disembodied ego, stripped of its empirical properties, as the ultimate source of philosophical certitude. In this regard, Husserl's attraction to transcendental idealism still sets him apart from Merleau-Ponty's insistence that man is firmly rooted in the 'life-world', and that an absolute phenomenological reduction is impossible. Yet Husserl's discriminations are methodologically significant. In the first instance, they demonstrate that the *epoche* can be made to proceed by a sequence of carefully plotted stages (as distinct from a mere succession of piecemeal exclusions). Secondly, Husserl's *epoche is* designed to encourage a return to the world in all its richness and variety, rather than a retreat from it. In *The Crisis,* the pivotal point of the philosophical enquiry is the crucial correlation between 'world and world-consciousness' (pp. 151-2).

Husserl's adapted notion of the *epoche,* then, offers a helpful tool for assessing the operation of a mature consciousness, like Lambert Strether's; the growth of his knowledge and capacity for judging is not simply a matter of linear progress. There is a complex double movement, which involves both reaching out towards new objectives - objectives which perhaps are not even clearly defined or understood - and steadily shedding a variety of established presuppositions,

[2] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology,* trans. David Carr (Evanston, 111.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 17.

which draw their force from custom and the benefit of easy familiarity. It is this emphasis which firmly distinguishes my philosophical reading of *The Ambassadors* from Richard A. Hocks's view that Strether's approach expresses the basic impetus of pragmatistic thought. Drawing on one of William James's formulations, Hocks argues that 'Strether's "experience is remoulding [him] every moment, and [his] mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of [his] experience of the whole world up to that date"'. This statement provides a useful means of entry to the novel, especially as it stresses the important relationship between the Woollett editor's past and his increasing stock of transforming impressions. But to Hocks such an attitude suggests not so much a simple linear model as a circular one, for a *'full* pragmatistic approach to the novel would be literally endless in its circularity and "roundness", revolving without halting', and producing ever new valuations of the available evidence. In fact, to escape from this predicament, and to accord the novel its necessary principle of artistic and theoretical unity, Hocks has to turn to a Coleridgean concept of 'polarity'-of interpenetrating opposites held in a dynamic and life-giving equilibrium *(Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought,* pp. 152-81). The interpretation in terms of the gradual *epoche,* by contrast, is neither reductively linear nor disconcertingly - perhaps self-defeatingly - circular. It allows for a series of steady pulses, both in Strether's career and in the complex evolution for the whole novel, with each phase taking up the vital energy of the preceding one, while the superseded attitudes and judgements are allowed to dissipate themselves. Yet the novel retains its guiding momentum and its potential for preserving crucial dramatic insights. But this account raises further questions about the process of knowing itself: how can the sustained education of such a fictional hero be worked out in such a context? Yet again, the processes of story-telling are central to the pursuit of philosophical enquiry itself.

In these circumstances, it is illuminating to look to phenomenological resources for an indication of the ways in which information about the world, a strategy for exploring its surface and depths, may be acquired. If the subtle relevance of the phenomenological reduction is to be appreciated - and this approach has a key bearing on James's portrayal of Strether's struggle to preserve his integrity, while refining his perceptions - the functioning of consciousness under these conditions must be elucidated. Now one of the

major concerns of phenomenology has always been the intentional nature of consciousness: that is, consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. That may scarcely seem a startling advance, for the view is as old as Greek philosophy. However, Husserl's solid contribution to this theory is his division of the operation of consciousness into two separate aspects, the subjective and the objective. These are given the technical names of noesis and noema (see *Ideas,* pp. 249-81). The noetic pole represents the 'act structure' of any conscious engagement. There is a wide variety of ways in which perceiving may occur in the act of perception, or judging in forming a judgement - and these subjective modulations or complications need to be fully described and interpreted just as they occur in their respective shaping phases of awareness.

The noema, on the other hand, stands out as the object perceived or judged. However, this is not to be confused with an actual, physical object, neutrally situated in three-dimensional space, like the object known to natural scientists. Aron Gurwitsch succinctly explains that the 'noema of perception', for instance, is 'the object such, exactly such and only such, as the perceiving subject is aware of it, as he intends it in this concrete experienced mental state... the noema may also be designated as the perceptual sense'.[3] It is, moreover, possible to extend this notion of noema beyond the simple context of perceptual responses. As Gurwitsch points out in a later article, one can think of Shakespeare as the historical figure, or as the writer of the Sonnets, or as the author of *Hamlet* — and the same noema, or 'intended sense', will correspond to the three different acts of consciousness, or noeses. This brings to the fore the status held by noemata, not as psychological events, nor as material things, nor even as the representatives of material things: but as meanings.[4]

The emphasis on meaning in turn throws into relief one of the most valuable conceptual procedures supplied by phenomenology, the method of intentional analysis. Intentional analysis passes far beyond the limitations of conventional analytic techniques, for it draws its strength from Husserl's view of consciousness as dynamic, as a vitally inseparable correlation of noetic and noematic components. To take a straightforward example, the perception of any object will render

[3] Aron Gurwitsch, 'On the Intentionality of Consciousness', in *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and its Interpretation,* p. 128.
[4] Aron Gurwitsch, 'Towards a Theory of Intentionality', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* 30 (1970), 363-4.

that object incompletely, only as it is seen from a particular perspective and at a particular moment in time. Yet the one-sidedness of this view may be overcome by further acts of perception, all of which contribute to an integrated process aimed at offering a more comprehensive sense of the object in question. Each aspect of the thing implicitly contains references to other aspects; in noematic terms, such references are essential features of the noema itself, and in noetic terms they anticipate subsequent acts of examination and verification. Naturally the later acts of perception will have to be carried out in a temporal sequence. However, what really counterbalances the one-sidedness of each individual attempt is, as Joseph J. Kockelmans points out, the fact that these individual endeavours 'confirm, complement and perfect' one another. Considered noetically, perception becomes a process of fulfilment.[5] Intentional analysis is not, therefore, simply a technique of dissection, of breaking down the operation of man's conscious engagement with the world into a series of separately identifiable units. On the contrary, it is a creative method, which works towards the evolution of a more comprehensive understanding of the functioning of conscious life by exploring all the available possibilities, and searching for the fullest and most convincing evidence in relation to any particular project. The intentional analysis of an act of perception, for instance, will examine the widest available range of noetic and noematic correlates, as the philosopher tries to establish what it really means ' to perceive'.

To treat this question of intentional analysis from a slightly different perspective, the disadvantage of one-sidedness in perceptual awareness is offset by the advantage of open-endedness, the promise of further disclosures. In fact, the object being considered has a sharply defined noematic 'core' or 'nucleus', which is immediately presented in the particular experience, but which also refers to other features not immediately given. In effect, a single perception of the object suggests other possible perceptions to complete the picture; the object has an 'internal horizon' which can be probed in an attempt to capture the thing in its plenitude. At the same time, any object must be seen within a context, which helps to define its contours and identity. This is known as the 'external horizon', for an observer may, if he chooses, shift his attention from the thing originally noticed to its surroundings, thus establishing a different point of focus. Once

[5] Joseph J. Kockelmans, 'Intentional and Constitutive Analyses', in *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and its Interpretation*, p. 142.

more, these insights can be extended beyond the realm of ordinary perception and applied, for instance, to the solving of logical or theoretical problems. It is this making of the implicit explicit, this exploration of potentialities - thus converting them into actualities — which is a distinguishing characteristic of intentional analysis.

Once again, if this process is viewed under its temporal and noetic guise, intentional analysis involves an articulated series of pretensions: reaching ahead to grasp indistinct features of the object which are about to be apprehended. Moreover, the individual can alter the modality of his perception. He can postulate what he might perceive, if he were to direct the course of his activity differently, by changing his physical position, or by referring to a memory of the object in which he might have seen alternative aspects of its appearance. Or he can engage in a series of imaginative variations on the central project.[6] Here too, the creative opportunities provided are striking. Intentional analysis shows the mind at the full pitch of its commerce with the world, seeking out the diversity of vaguely presented possibilities, calling on the resources of the imagination, and exploring its own capacity for constructive response.

Since the question of meaning is paramount for Husserl, his method of intentional analysis is peculiarly relevant to a work like *The Ambassadors.* For the novel vividly enacts the search for meaning, the exhilarated (and often baffled) engagement of Strether's awareness with the constantly changing phenomena that surround him. There is no obvious solution to his constant enquiry; he cannot add up the elements of each problem like figures on a slate. Not only does Strether himself move forward by repeatedly probing the indefinite horizons of his experience, but the structure of the novel itself follows this pattern. Every ' scene' or ' picture' contains within itself the germ of later developments as potentialities needing to be actualized. Finally, the novel itself achieves its measure of plenitude once the contributing aspects of Strether's adventure begin to 'confirm, complement and perfect' one another. Nonetheless, the novel retains both its external and internal horizons. The story is complete, but it is not finished, as the fates of the characters remain open and uncertain - their future possibilities are skilfully sketched in, but nothing is irrevocably determined. On a subtler level, the text itself presents a constant challenge to inventive interpretation and

[6] For a detailed discussion of these methodological possibilities, see Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, i960), pp. 44-9.

reinterpretation. James gives away none of his conclusions, and the reader is obliged to work - to work very hard - to judge 'the whole piece by the pattern' of each substantial movement, and such patterns by the structure of the whole piece.[7] In this respect, Merleau-Ponty is shrewd in urging the value of the unfinished work which is, nonetheless, complete. As he points out, this characteristic is frequently the sign of a search for new modes of communication; there is no readily available, objectively presented evidence, but a striving towards a fresh set of relations which will inaugurate a fresh set of meanings.[8]

If it seems awkwardly anachronistic to apply these contentions to a novel written in the early part of this century, before the formal establishment of the Phenomenological Movement as a clearly indentifiable philosophical school, a further analogy with William James's psychological investigations may serve to place the case in perspective.[9] This is not to argue, as Hocks does in *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought,* that Henry - albeit unwittingly - gave fictional embodiment to his brother's leading philosophical principles. It is rather to show that the problem of relating the known to the implicitly suggested, the actual to the potentially realizable, emerges as an important concern of that period and within that cultural setting - indeed, within the immediate circle of the James family. At that stage, moreover, it was possible to formulate such a problem in terms strikingly similar to those later evolved by writers with a distinct phenomenological bias. In fact, Edmund Husserl commends William James for being the only psychologist of his day to become aware of the importance of the horizon (James calls it the 'fringe') that surrounds the phenomena present to consciousness. However, he regrets that William James allows consciousness to remain 'anonymous' in his studies, so that he misses the phenomenological breakthrough that follows the discovery of the transcendental subjectivity of the phenomenological reduction *[The Crisis,* p. 264).

In *The Principles of Psychology,* James distinguishes 'knowledge about' a thing from simple, immediate acquaintance with it (Vol. 1, pp. 221-2).' Knowledge about' something is achieved in the presence

[7] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *Partial Portraits,* p. 389.

[8] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World,* ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 56.

[9] For a more extended treatment of the complex links between the imaginative production of Henry James, the theoretical achievement of his brother, William, and the development of phenomenological thinking, see Section III of the Introduction.

of its 'psychic fringes or overtones' which give it a concrete context and help to further the process of thought. 'Relation', James argues, to some matter of interest

> is constantly felt in the fringe, and particularly the relation of harmony and discord, of furtherance or hindrance of the topic. When the sense of furtherance is there, we are 'all right'; with the sense of hindrance we are dissatisfied and perplexed, and cast about us for other thoughts, (p. 259)

In this area, as Bruce Wilshire notes, there is another connection between the approaches of Husserl and James. Husserl clearly states that there is a difference between the full noema of any intentional act, and the bare noematic *nucleus* or 'the sheer *"objective meaning"'.* The nucleus will remain constant through any number of separate acts of perceiving, judging or imagining which are directed towards a given object, while the full noema will vary in accordance with the nature of the particular conscious process involved *(Ideas,* pp. 265-6). For James, the 'Object of thought' has the same role as Husserl's noema, whereas the 'topic' is the mere central kernel of identification, bereft of the nexus of relations which lend the Object its total significance.[10] This points up James's sense of the rich amplification which any phenomenon derives from its integration into a horizonal field.

However, it would be misleading to overemphasize the similarities in theoretical outlook between James and Husserl. James remains a psychologist, drawing his conclusions on the basis of the empirically evaluated evidence which presents itself within the 'stream of consciousness'; he tries in this manner to establish how the mind operates, how experience may be ordered. Husserl, on the other hand, adopts his phenomenological method in order to delineate the fundamental structures of consciousness, those that are invariably essential for, and central to, the creation of meaning. He is determined to uncover not only the limiting conditions of experience, but those which, *per necessitatem,* give it its particular form.[11] This is why he feels William James's theory of the 'fringe' to be inadequate; he sees it as too narrowly empirical, and as therefore missing the transforming

[10] See Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology,* pp. 120-1, 237. Wilshire also provides a well-documented account of the relationship between James's notion of the' fringe' and Husserl's concept of the horizon (pp. 119-23).

[11] For an informative appraisal of these differences in theoretical orientation between James and Husserl, see Richard Stevens, *James and Husserl: The Foundations of Meaning* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 56-7, and Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology,* pp. 186-9.

insights supplied by the notion of intentionality and the clearly articulated 'correlation-conception' of consciousness. At the same time, this gives prominence to Husserl's sustained preoccupation with essences as a means of apprehending the true nature of consciousness and the objects with which it deals. The phenomenological reduction is, in his terms, not only a return to the examination of pure phenomena, just as they give themselves; it is also eidetic (or concerned with essences). The phenomenologist aims to discover, by taking a particular act of judging as his starting point, both the essence of the process of judging, *qua* judging, and the essence of the judgement, once delivered.

This may seem a repellently abstract and antiseptic use of the concept of 'essence', in view of Husserl's emphasis on the rigorous application of his method and his focus on the transcendental sphere. However, just as Merleau-Ponty is able to breathe the warmth of living thought into the idea of the phenomenological reduction, so he puts forward a thoroughly humanized and readily accessible interpretation of Husserl's eidetic theory. In his *Phenomenology of Perception,* he argues that 'Husserl's essences are destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman's net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed' (p. xv). Far from being remote ideal constructs, Husserl's essences turn out to be 'morphological' or inexact by nature. His terms of reference are 'great' and 'warm', 'oblique' and 'jagged', even 'notched like a lentil', rather than the precise concepts of mathematics and the natural sciences.[12] His preoccupation with meaning is not confined to the cold elucidation of logical validities, but embraces the whole range of human experience, as it is lived and felt.

Yet this very qualification of phenomenological concepts and procedures introduces an element of uncertainty into the investigation of philosophical problems. Merleau-Ponty recasts Husserl's discoveries in a form which is more appropriate to the daily experience of embodied individuals, rather than transcendental subjectivities. But Husserl's vocabulary of 'protensions' and 'unseen sides' of objects, not to mention the prospect of a phenomenological

[12] See Emmanuel Levinas, 'Intuition of Essences', trans. Joseph J. Kockelmans, in *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and its Interpretation,* pp. 101-4, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man', trans. John Wild, in *'The Primacy of Perception' and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics,* ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, 111.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 67-8.

reduction which occurs by stages, again conjures up the play of 'differing' and 'deferring' entailed in Derridean *differance.* Derrida himself notes that 'this spacing is the simultaneously active and passive (the *a* of *differance* indicates this indecision as concerns activity and passivity, that which cannot be governed by or distributed between the terms of this opposition) production of the intervals without which the "full" terms would not signify, would not function'.[13] So *differance* is generated by the concerted quest for meanings or morphological essences, while it is also implicit in the contours of philosophical enquiry *per se.* At the same time, the pure presence of Husserlian essences is called into question by the repeated displacements of *differance,* which undermines the simple notion of a satisfying plenitude. The restless flux of *differance,* then, must be seen as inseparable from an analysis of the formulation of meanings or the processes of judgement in phenomenological terms. And this is, moreover, wholly in the spirit of phenomenological enquiry. It is not only that Derrida's questioning of the idea of an unmediated presence casts a critical light on the classic phenomenological enterprise; it is also that Husserl repeatedly insists on the uncompromising self-awareness of all philosophical effort.

This discussion has a close bearing on *The Ambassadors,* for Julie Rivkin offers a persuasive reading of the text in relation to Derrida's 'logic of the supplement'.

> The supplement, like the ambassador, is a stand-in supposed to alter nothing of that which it stands for; it is defined as an addition having no effect on the original to which it is being joined. Yet the existence of the addition implies that the original is incomplete and in need of supplementation; the paradoxical logic of supplementarity is that what adds onto also subtracts from, or reveals a lack in, the original.

Thus Strether, who is Mrs Newsome's delegate, finds himself unavoidably involved in a series of deferments and realignments, until he acknowledges that there is actually no perfect fulfilment of personal experience lurking at the heart of Parisian culture.[14] My examination of the novel is far more positive; while it takes account of the doubts and modifications which constantly attend Strether's mission, it demonstrates the growth of a unique and innovative mode

[13] Jacques Derrida, 'Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva', in *Positions,* trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981), p. 27.

[14] See Julie Rivkin, 'The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*', *PMLA,* 101 (1986), 819, 8:20-31.

of judging. Phenomenological and deconstructive insights are combined at once to plot and to illuminate James's creative engagement with the steady emergence of meaning in a variety of forms.

II

From the opening paragraph of *The Ambassadors,* Strether is engaged in a double process of unthinking' the evaluative standards which he has learnt at Woollett, and of probing the fresh horizons that confront him; he is attempting both to achieve the *epoche'in* its various stages, and to gain positive insights from the repeated intentional analyses of his predicament. This twofold movement is consonant with the double nature of his consciousness: 'There was a detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference' *(The Novels and Tales of Henry James,* Vol. 21, p. 5). In this respect, he possesses a philosophical turn of mind, one which can 'draw back from its commitment to the world', yet which also finds itself creatively engaged by the spectacle of human events. And it is in this curious guise of judicious philosopher, yet embroiled participant, that the visitor from the New World encounters the most teasing paradoxes of his trip; his two roles are both mutually necessary and mutually exclusive. Moreover, James here offers to the alert reader a useful clue to the possible course of Strether's development. The elderly editor's outlook cannot be identified simply with Woollett's standards, or the Puritan sensibility, or the New England conscience. Strether, in fact, proves himself to have a sound measure of wry self-knowledge, although the full ironic resonance of the novel naturally depends upon delicate controlling touches by the author.[15] At the same time, Strether's advance towards the penetration and original interpretation of his circumstances, after he has met Miss Gostrey, would seem remarkably rapid if he were simply a Puritan, giving way to an easy initiation into the perplexing manners of Europe. It is his more complicated awareness that fits him so well to appreciate the logic of Waymarsh's 'sacred rage' (Vol. 21, pp. 45-6). For Strether keenly assesses it not only as a bid for the freedom of unrestricted self-expression, but also as his friend's attempt at redressing the balance

[15] Ian Watt gives an excellent account of the narrative distance between the author and the central character in 'The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors:* An Explication', *Essays in Criticism,* 10 (i960), 257. In 'James the Old Intruder', John E. Tilford, Jr discusses this method and applies it to the novel as a whole *(Modern Fiction Studies,* 4 (1958), 157-64).

of interaction, at proving himself as much master of the situation as his companions. At this stage, Waymarsh embodies with triumphant simplicity the spirit of Milrose — its cultural attitudes and moral convictions. It is obvious that Europe is totally alien to him. Strether, on the other hand, can see himself in relation both to Waymarsh's behaviour and the European environment. He weighs Woollett against Milrose, the unsuccessful editor against the wealthy lawyer; but he also dissolves these quantities in the flow of his perceptions, and out of that rapid stream precipitates the humorous notion of the 'sacred rage'.

The cogency of Strether's image naturally benefits from his long-standing friendship with Waymarsh, for it embodies a half-reluctant admiration for some of the Milrose lawyer's distinguishing characteristics : his rigid loyalty to his cherished standards, his imperviousness to disconcerting outside influences, his austere flair for self-dramatizing action. And this admiration exposes Strether's devaluation of his own tentative personality and quietly analytical talents against the markings on the New England scale. From this point of view he regards himself as weak, inconsistent and insubstantial - too ready to launch into the mere enjoyment of pleasurable sights and sounds. But a definite scepticism offsets this cluster of beliefs. Strether also registers the delightfully comic element in the 'sacred rage'; it is a futile assertion, quite disproportionate to the occasion that provokes it. That is both its glory and its absurdity. The fact that Strether expresses his judgement in this particular image shows how close he still is to his uneasy relationship with his traditional American background. But the philosophical distance from Woollett norms, which is implicit in his individual style of interpreting his experience, is already beginning to widen. In this regard, it is significant that he, and not Maria Gostrey, is the one to identify the 'sacred rage'. Of course, she has only the slightest personal acquaintance with Waymarsh; yet she is 'the mistress of a hundred cases or categories, receptacles of the mind, subdivisions for convenience, in which, from a full experience, she pigeon-[holes] her fellow mortals with a hand as free as that of a compositor scattering type' (Vol. 21, p. 11). However, the convenient rule of thumb proves inadequate for making this initial discrimination, and she must depend on developing the idea that Strether brings to light. In one sense, his process of 'unthinking' Woollett has commenced, and he is preparing to give rein to his distinctively creative mode of judging.

This line of argument can be more fully illustrated - and supported - by a detailed analysis of Strether's responses to Chad after their meeting at the Comedie Francaise. An early form of his reaction is to discharge his ambassadorial duty as soon as practically possible, and so to forestall any liability to evasion. In the sternly literal spirit of Woollett, he is determined even to outwit the play of *differance.* Strether confronts Chad with

' I've come, you know, to make you break with everything, neither more nor less, and take you straight home; so you'll be so good as immediately and favourably to consider it!' (Vol. 21, p. 147)

This tone amounts almost to parody of his normal speech patterns, and is far more in keeping with Waymarsh's resounding injunction: 'Look here, Strether. Quit this!' (Vol. 21, p. 109). However, this approach is a manifestation of Strether's acute insecurity in the face of Chad's altered appearance. He has desperately seized upon the first means of opening discussion that comes into his mind. He disconcerts himself by his apparently crude choice of expression - and this again points out the degree to which he now dissociates himself from the accents of Woollett in his search for a voice which will be distinctively his own. He has managed to 'bracket' the more superficial manifestations of his New England upbringing; yet, at a deeper level, the sense of involvement persists. This passage subtly underscores the practical difficulties involved in performing the phenomenological *epoche.* In a similar fashion, Strether's capacity for breaking fresh ground is revealed in his late-night walk with Chad, when his provisional view of Mrs Newsome's son as 'the young man marked out by women' (Vol. 21, p. 153) yields to his regarding Chad, first as a 'Pagan' (Vol. 21, pp. 156-7), and then as a 'gentleman' (Vol. 21, p. 160). More than ever before, Strether is anxious to find the appropriate terms to express his judgement. This is an excellent example of his application of the technique of intentional analysis. Strether cannot grasp at a single stroke the phenomenon that confronts him, so he tests one vaguely sensed horizon of potentialities after another, searching for the complementary elements of a comprehensive explanation. And these experimental formulations are not necessarily mutually exclusive; the qualifying operation of *differance* suggests the need for repeated differential contrasts and puzzled deferments. Chad's being a 'gentleman' does not automatically cancel the notion of him as a

'Pagan', as well. It is rather that the later conception qualifies and elaborates the earlier, throwing into relief an unexpected series of subtle interconnections. Although Strether steadily augments and modifies his stock of interpretative images, no fixed and final solution can be reached.[18]

The scene approaches its climax when Chad accuses his family in Woollett of having a 'low mind' if they believe that a young man may only be detained in Paris by his entanglement with a woman. This cut causes the following response in Strether:

It so fell in, unhappily for Strether, with that reflexion of his own prompted in him by the pleasant air of the Boulevard Malesherbes, that its disconcerting force was rather unfairly great. It was a dig that, administered by himself- and administered even to poor Mrs Newsome - was no more than salutary; but administered by Chad - and quite logically - it came nearer drawing blood. They *had n't* a low mind - nor any approach to one; yet incontestably they had worked, and with a certain smugness, on a basis that might be turned against them. (Vol. 21, pp. 159-60)

James's prose clearly evokes Strether's embarrassment - and a certain sense of shame - yet the complicated turns of the reasoning show that the ambassador is not simply confused. On this occasion, Strether gives expression to his feeling that only a global view of the situation can do justice to the moral problem at its centre. On the one hand, Chad's indignation is fair and understandable; on the other, Woollett had no means of knowing how dramatically the young man's mode of conduct had changed, especially as he seemed in his early days abroad to have become involved in a number of superficial liaisons as part of his general search for pleasurable fresh experiences. Yet again, Strether can identify the smugness and narrowness of many of Woollett's presuppositions. The distance between his intimate self-awareness and the familiar New England patterns of judgement has increased still further; however, he acknowledges the sincere intentions of the friends who depend upon an evaluative scheme of that kind. It is because he is evolving his own method of gathering evidence, placing it in the broad context of its multiple

[16] Hocks also examines this passage in some depth, but his reading suggests that each stage in the perceptual process supersedes the previous one, so that a repeated 'remodelling' is taking place (see *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought,* pp. 161-3). Paul B. Armstrong, relying on constructs drawn from reception theory, contends that Strether is experimenting with preliminary formulae, which are later to be slotted into a fuller interpretative schema (*The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 67-70).

relations, and then working towards a conclusion, that he can give Mrs Newsome full credit for her integrity.

Against this background, it is important to register more thoroughly the sort of impression that Chad makes upon Strether during the latter part of their long-delayed meeting. If there is a 'certain smugness' in Mrs Newsome's characterization of Chad's way of life in Paris, there is equally a certain glibness in Chad's ready resentment of these imputations. There is a tinge of self-satisfaction in his disgust which overshadows the stir of genuine feeling. This tone, as much as any sound claim to a sense of injury, 'draws blood' when the young American confronts Strether. It makes the ambassador uneasy, as does Chad's trick of' designedly showing himself under the light of a conveniently placed street-lamp (Vol. 21, p. 156). Strether's hazy suspicions at this point are indicative of his perceptiveness; his early reservations argue against the not uncommon critical claim that the utterly changed Chad is simply Strether's imaginative construction. There is considerable force in H. Peter Stowell's contention that the change in Chad is an index of the change in Strether himself, and that he will only arrive at a fully realistic view of the young man at the end of his educative adventure.[17] However, Strether is not a mere dupe or fantasizer, even though he is undoubtedly mistaken about Chad's aims or motives on a number of occasions, frequently misreading the evidence which is laid before him. Yet he persists, exploring new and still newer horizons, and trying to organize a system of complementary insights, until he eventually achieves a healthily sceptical regard, both for Chad himself and for his professions. It is no mere dramatic coincidence that in their last encounter Chad is again showing himself under a street-lamp, while appearing to perform a fantastic little jig on the pavement (Vol. 22, p. 316). A hollowness gnaws away at the dialogue, and James delicately shades in Strether's sharpening impression of Chad's restlessness and dissatisfaction (Vol. 22, p. 318).

As a corrective to Stowell's remarks, it is perhaps helpful to note that Strether's enthusiastic exaggeration of the alteration in Chad does not necessarily mean that Chad has not changed at all. It is true that Miss Gostrey warns the ambassador that Chad is ' not so good' as he thinks (Vol. 21, p. 171); moreover, little Bilham endorses this caution with the announcement that his friend is not' really meant by

[17] H. Peter Stowell, *Literary Impressionism: James and Chekhov* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 209.

nature to be quite so good' (Vol. 21, p. 177). However, both these qualified negative opinions point to at least some degree of social polish and presence in the young man - some definite improvement on his original 'roughness'. Thus the novel itself provides a series of counter-checks, and allows the reader to proceed in the knowledge that Strether, as an aspiring philosopher and increasingly reluctant representative of Woollett, is not hopelessly deluded. Insofar as the process of intentional analysis is concerned, the problem of the change in Chad suggests a valuable modification to a philosophical theory which is already challenged by Derrida's disclosure of the play of *differance.* If it is uncertain whether the philosopher, in his contemplation of relatively simple acts of perception, may actually achieve access to phenomena in the absolute purity of their givenness, this never happens on the plane of ordinary, everyday experience. Strether's bafflements and stumblings nonetheless show how error can make a positive contribution to the search for fulfilling enlightenment. Once he has embarked upon his subjective adventure, Strether's consciousness is assaulted by a vast array of objects of possible interest. There are almost too many horizons to explore, and too many relations to weave into a satisfactorily coherent scheme. Yet, with his readiness to acknowledge mistakes and his sustained curiosity, he is able to persist until he arrives at a richer clarity of understanding. The misidentifications do not constitute irredeemable waste, but rather a succession of hard-won markers on the way to ascertaining what, in the fullest possible sense, is involved in the process of judging.

The events of the party in Gloriani's garden, and in particular Strether's 'Live all you can...' speech, bring this complicated relationship between bewilderment and the apprehension of new meanings into sharp focus. In his preface to *The Ambassadors,* James writes that his hero 'would n't have indulged in his peculiar tone without a reason: it would take a felt predicament or a false position to give him so ironic an accent'. And later in the same paragraph, James gives a specific shape to Strether's disorientating predicament.

> he had come to Paris in some state of mind which was literally undergoing, as a result of new and unexpected assaults and infusions, a change almost from hour to hour. He had come with a view that might have been figured by a clear green liquid, say, in a neat glass phial; and the liquid, once poured into the open cup *of application,* once exposed to the action of another air, had begun to turn from green to red, or whatever, and might, for all he knew, be

on its way to purple, to black, to yellow. At the still wilder extremes represented perhaps, for all he could say to the contrary, by a variability so violent, he would at first, naturally, but have gazed in surprise and alarm; whereby the *situation* clearly would spring from the play of wildness and the development of extremes. *(The Art of the Novel,* pp. 313-14)

At this stage Strether has advanced further than ever before in the process of the gradually exercised phenomenological *epoche.* The atmosphere of Woollett thought has been dissipated, and while he is still aware of the content of New England opinions, he has withdrawn his individual assent. This leaves him free to receive openly the flux of new impressions, to explore and experiment. The charm of the old garden sets the fibres of his sensibility into a wondering and sympathetic vibration; then there is Gloriani's expert appraisal of him as a man, the banter with little Bilham and Miss Barrace in which Strether tugs at different threads of the intricate skein in an attempt to discover what his whole situation *means,* and finally the revelation of his first meeting with Mme de Vionnet. All this prepares the way for his exhortation to little Bilham:

'Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It does n't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you have n't had that what *have* you had? This place and these impressions - mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I've seen at *his* place - well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped *that* into my mind. I see it now. I have n't done so enough before - and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I *do* see, at least; and more than you'd believe or I can express. It's too late.' (Vol. 21, p. 217)

The idea that Strether is in a 'false position', that this speech is a reflection of his social discomforture and loss of intellectual poise, leads to one possible order of critical response. As sensitive a reader as Laurence Holland sets the 'splendid and moving' quality of Strether's delivery of his thoughts against the foolishness of offering such advice to little Bilham. If, as Holland understands it, 'living' entails 'seeing', Bilham is already an accomplished spectator of life.[18] To treat the negative aspects of the speech first, there can be no doubt that Strether is at a loss for a coherent interpretation of the drama of manners being enacted around him; it is, in effect, the key to these mystifying proceedings that he is so anxious to discover. The pressure of sheer involvement squeezes aside Strether's capacity for shrewd

[18] Laurence Bedwell Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 252—3.

analysis, subtly pointing up the paradoxical situation of the committed philosopher, who must nonetheless rely upon his capacity for composed detachment. And there is a pointlessness about the older man's trying to advise little Bilham, when the young artist has been guiding him so tactfully through the labyrinth of his personal encounters in Paris. However, Holland's close identification of 'seeing' with 'living' in Strether's appeal seems misplaced. For the succession of Strether's ideas — disjointed though it appears — suggests that 'seeing' involves appreciating opportunities as much as becoming a delicately attuned observer. That is why Strether later regretfully uses the metaphor of having missed the train, although it waited for him at the station; that is why 'what one loses, one loses' has such a resigned cadence (Vol. 21, p. 217). Nor is the remark that 'it does n't so much matter what you do in particular' an outright rejection of the commitment to action. Instead, it is a subordination of the practicalities of any career to a keen awareness of life's varied and attractive resources. Seeing and understanding still play a central role, but self-fulfilment is regarded as prior to competition for public success.

In the light of this modification of Holland's argument, a new range of ironies seems to be shadowed forth by Strether's speech. If he has lost the life of action and direct commitment, he is nonetheless living with a rare intensity at the level of seeing and appreciating. And the intensity of his sensibility virtually transforms observation and reflection into a definite involvement. Once he regains his equilibrium, he fully justifies his status as keenly experimenting detached-involved phenomenological thinker. It is a matter not so much of recovering what he has lost or might have enjoyed, as of discovering himself- and a totally new way of relating to the world. So, for instance, his warming to Mme de Vionnet's 'common humanity' is not merely another misreading of the European social code, which he will later have to correct (Vol. 21, pp. 212—13). Of course, there is a grave danger inherent in associating the lady introduced by Chad with Mrs Newsome and Mrs Pocock, and grouping all three under the description *'femmes du monde* As Hocks points out,' an entire complex of cultural values' separates Paris from Woollett *(Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought,* p. 167). On the other hand, these women of fashion are not so different when they are viewed as ordinary human beings. Each knows how to manipulate the codes most appropriate to her society; each betrays certain

limitations in her conversational skills when meeting a man under formal conditions; each cultivates her own manner of creating a pleasing and appropriate impression. Most important of all, Strether has managed to dispel the disturbingly unsavoury reputation in which Woollett has contrived to envelop Mme de Vionnet. He responds to her as a woman of charm and accomplishment, someone whose demeanour unquestionably qualifies her to stand comparison with the ladies of New England. And this is a feat which Sarah Pocock, hampered not so much by alien cultural overtones as by sheer personal prejudice, never begins to achieve.

While this order of perception on its own is not adequate for dealing with the full impact of a varied experience in a sophisticated society, Strether also shows a capacity for refining the process of intentional analysis. At his first encounter with Gloriani in the artist's garden, he is, as I have already suggested, overwhelmed by the ' assault of images' which threatens to upset his sense of being in touch with certain stable intellectual reference points (Vol. 21, pp. 196-7). He is acutely conscious of having his personal attributes subjected to a penetrating and unmerciful scrutiny; yet he feels the thrill of talking to a person famous for his creative abilities. The second reaction may be naive, but it is not altogether foolish. For Lambert Strether, the obscure editor, the name on the beautiful green cover of Woollett's review, there must be a special delight in at last making contact, if only for a brief moment, with the 'real thing'. At the same time, it seems likely that his susceptibility to Gloriani's 'human expertness' is not mere fanciful fabrication. If his host is, in fact, an acclaimed sculptor, it is reasonable to assume that he would command a certain minimum level of competence in assessing cultural types and weighing up individual character.[19] To put it in phenomenological terms, James is presenting the noema of Strether's perception: Gloriani just as he is seen by a particular person from a particular point of view at a particular instant. The act of perception, as an inseparable correlation of subjective and objective poles, is captured in its teasing complexity. Yet this noematic correlate is later modified and enriched when Strether watches the manner of the sculptor at Chad's carefully contrived dinner-party. Then the ambassador detects 'a charming hollow civility' which is projected to span a

[19] For a close analysis of the impression that Gloriani makes upon Strether in his capacity as an artist, see Viola Hopkins Winner, *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1970), pp. 112-13.

yawning social gulf; and, as James makes clear, 'Strether would n't have trusted his own full weight a moment' on this insubstantial bridge (Vol. 21, p. 262). This new insight does not crudely cancel out the earlier reaction, although a major reshaping occurs. Strether has advanced towards a fresh horizon of potentialities, which he has now succeeded in actualizing. He begins to feel that the great artist is not only an intensely intelligent, romantically inspiring creator, or a lithe 'male tiger' (Vol. 21, p. 219), but also a skilled manipulator of social conventions, a cynic, something of an adventurer. This assessment floods Strether with relief, because yet another small piece of the Parisian jigsaw has fallen into place. He, in his far quieter turn, has shrewdly appraised Gloriani; as an added gain, he has realized how a further aspect of the social game is played.

The final test of the validity of Strether's educational process comes in his last visit to Mme de Vionnet at her home with its charming evocations of the long history and deeply rooted culture of Paris. During the hours leading up to his interview with her, Strether drifts in a sort of limbo, unable to find a secure point of anchorage after his revelatory chance encounter with the pair of lovers at the inn on the Seine. His sense of disorientation illustrates the final stage of what I have called the 'gradual *epochf,* the successive stages of his discarding the accumulated layers of Woollett customs and standards. As he drifts about the city, there is a hint that he may be about to 'revert' to 'his old tradition', on which he has relied for so many years. He wonders why ' the state of the wrongdoer' does not present some special problem, and this suggests an expectation of summary and effective punishment. He wonders why he himself, in view of his tolerant attitude towards the liaison between his young friends and his ready response to Mme de Vionnet's summons, does not *'look* demoralised and disreputable' (Vol. 22, pp. 272-3). But these are mere speculations, drained of any sharp accusatory charge or impetus towards appropriate action. Strether examines what he thinks he *ought* to feel and think, yet these codified values have passed beyond his personal reach; for all their practical force, they have been securely 'bracketed'.

The new method which he has found for relating to events is expressed in his transforming vision of Mme de Vionnet. As always, he is susceptible to the delicate seduction of her beautiful rooms as an idealized setting; however, he soon penetrates to the very heart of her predicament: that she is 'afraid for [her] life' (Vol. 22, p. 285).

She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of time; but she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given to him, in all his years, to meet; and yet he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man. The only thing was that she judged herself as the maidservant would n't; the weakness of which wisdom too, the dishonour of which judgement, seemed but to sink her lower. Her collapse, however, no doubt, was briefer and she had in a manner recovered herself before he intervened. 'Of course I'm afraid for my life. But that's nothing. It is n't that.' (Vol. 22, p. 286)

This is the culmination of all that he has learned: art and the toughness of the workaday world, commitment and detachment, passion and compassion, are held in a tremulous balance. The fact that Strether sees to the core of Mme de Vionnet's unflatteringly human trouble does not destroy his sympathy for her, nor his appreciation of her finely varied accomplishments. It is rather that the paradox of vulgarity so mysteriously combined with the surest subtlety enhances her for him as a vital, fallible person; Mme de Vionnet becomes ordinary, yet touchingly rare. Once again, it is important to establish that Strether is not attempting to escape from unpalatable facts by weaving around them a halo of romantic fantasy.[20] He has long since outgrown the rigid criteria of Woollett moralism. Instead he has discovered the creative, if demanding, practice of *morality,* just as Maisie comes to adopt this approach in her contacts with the strange assortment of people who compose her immediate circle.

Yet James demonstrates that Strether and Maisie arrive at their discovery by noticeably different routes. While the young girl's task is simplified from the outset, because she has no conception of how conventional valuations would be formed, Strether (like the dedicated phenomenologist) has to follow a long and tortuous trail. The double movement of his consciousness, both in the direction of 'unthinking' the intellectual deposits laid by his former social and cultural instruction, and in the direction of unflagging, open enquiry, gives the clue to his concluding achievement. The journey is dogged by numerous false starts and wrong turnings. This is why the notion of Derridean *differance* seems especially pertinent to *The Ambassadors.* Yet, in the end, Strether's capacity for judging human phenomena

[20] For a representative version of the argument that Strether indulges in a romantic revision of the existing circumstances, see Robert E. Garis, 'The Two Lambert Strethers: A New Reading of *The Ambassadors', Modem Fiction Studies,* 7 (1961-2), 311-14.

has acquired a deeply seasoned maturity, which draws on his miscalculations as much as on his productive insights. So he does not need to set charm and pathos against self-indulgence and deception; he can draw upon an integrated perception of Mme de Vionnet, as someone comprehensively and humanly understood. This is not to assign to Strether some kind of absolute moral prerogative; for his pleasantly disturbing, imperfectly concealed - yet quite unrealizable - love for Mme de Vionnet adds an ironic dimension to the fullness of his compassion. His predicament palely shadows hers, and brings them into a curious intimacy of susceptibility. It is just the degree of Strether's own vulnerability and uncertainty which paradoxically testifies to the appropriateness of his compassion.

A useful way of illuminating both Strether's uniquely individual method of judging, and his progress towards fuller knowledge, lies in contrasting his characteristic modes of response with those of Mme de Vionnet. Like Christina Light and Miriam Rooth - two of James's earlier heroines - Marie de Vionnet lives vividly and engagingly through acting, through the energy of self-dramatization. At the same time, marked differences separate her from her predecessors. She is neither tensely seeking an escape from herself and the dullness of her constricting situation, like Christina, nor can she boast Miriam's professional detachment and control. Nor, finally, does she possess the intellectual self-command of Kate Croy, who generally knows to the finest degree which social parts are best suited to her exceptional talents. Marie de Vionnet, however, *is* the acting, *is* the parts insofar as it is possible for any human being to achieve this state. As Strether perceptively realizes, 'her art [is] all an innocence' and her 'innocence... all an art' (Vol. 22, p. 116). It is this plastic quality about her which also prompts the analogy with a Shakespearean model: like 'Cleopatra in the play', Mme de Vionnet is 'indeed various and multifold' (Vol. 22, p. 271).[21] But the comparison with Shakespeare's Cleopatra should not be too rigidly or literally applied. James skilfully dissolves such external material in the medium of his own narrative; thus the delicately tinted descriptions of Marie de Vionnet, now as a 'goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud',

[21] This image of Mme de Vionnet as Cleopatra has been examined in considerable detail from a variety of points of view: see, for instance, U. C. Knoepflmacher,'" O rare for Strether!": *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Ambassadors', Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 19 (1965), 333-44, and Herbert R. Coursen, Jr, '"The Mirror of Allusion": *The Ambassadors', New England Quarterly,* 34 (1961), 382-4.

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now as a 'sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge', now as a head on a silver Renaissance coin, also include 'the*femme du monde* in her habit as she lived' (Vol. 21, p. 271). This quiet echo of the intimately private encounter between Hamlet and his father's ghost (iu.iv. 135) shows just how cleverly James is drawing upon his Shakespearean sources, relying upon their allusive quality without allowing these references to interrupt the flow of his novel's argument and image patterns.

The evocation of Cleopatra is particularly helpful in giving substance to Mme de Vionnet's potential for revealing raw emotion, and in explaining the impression which she makes upon Strether at their last meeting. Maria Gostrey has, in part, prepared the way by recounting the irregularity of her school-friend's upbringing, and by calling to mind not only her slight waywardness but also her passion for acting any part that came to hand in their early dramatic experiments (Vol. 21, pp. 230—1). All the same, it remains a shock when the mantle of sophistication seems to slide from her, and to expose her as ordinary and very vulnerable. It is almost as though the role *of femme du monde* has given way to that of the maidservant 'crying for her young man', because Mme de Vionnet must depend on some form of dramatic projection to achieve self-expression.[22] And the discord is increased because she is somehow too sensitive and self-aware for this part. It is Strether's compassionate vision, his pitying appreciation, which overcomes the awkwardness as much as her quick recovery. At this moment, the roles of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra are reversed; for it is Strether who redeems Mme de Vionnet by the flood of his gentle understanding, whereas Cleopatra celebrates in her imagination the glorious qualities of the dead Antony.

> For his bounty,
> There was no winter in 't: an autumn 'twas
> That grew the more by reaping: his delights
> Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above
> The element they lived in…
>
> (v.ii.86)

[22] This perhaps suggests a further Shakespearean parallel with Cleopatra's violent lament over the death of Antony:

> No more but e'en a woman, and commanded
> By such poor passion as the maid that milks,
> And does the meanest chares.
>
> (1v.xv.73)

This is the unique talent, a talent amounting almost to genius, of Strether's double consciousness. Unlike Mme de Vionnet, who finds herself totally involved in the events of the moment, Strether can exercise his special blend of detachment and commitment, of theoretical distanciation and personal dedication. Once again, the phenomenological notion of noesis and noema proves relevant: he judges the particular woman, both as she appears and as he responds to her, in the full light of the surrounding circumstances. In this respect, the philosophical search for meaning takes on a new resonance, for the interpretation that Strether establishes is one shot through with the consequences of his deeply humane perception, quickened by generosity and pitying wonder. This is very much a case of standing back from the world in order to rediscover the world without any inhibiting prior conceptions. It is an exhibition of the free play of intentional analysis - of not tampering negatively with experience, but scrutinizing its steady flow, and unfolding horizon upon horizon in the attempt to build up a composite and living picture.

An investigation of one further stage along the way to Strether's culminating vision helps to provide a convincing confirmatory touch to this explanation of the Woollett ambassador's moral and intellectual development. The occasion on which Strether unexpectedly finds Mamie Pocock, upon going to call on her sister-in-law at her hotel, has sadly received very little constructive critical attention. E. M. Forster, for example, seems completely to have misread the deep significance of these pages when he characterizes Mamie as 'second-rate, deficient in sensitiveness, abounding in the wrong sort of worldliness'.[23] Quite to the contrary, Strether's impressions of Mamie undergo a subtle series of modifications, which far exceed these narrow, stereotyped categories. First there are the ambassador's memories of their acquaintance in the Woollett days:

> There was always their old relation, the fruit of the Woollett years; but that - and it was what was strangest - had nothing whatever in common with what was now in the air. As a child, as a 'bud', and then again as a flower of expansion, Mamie had bloomed for him, freely, in the almost incessantly open doorways of home; where he remembered her as first very forward, as then very backward ... and once more, finally, as very much in advance. But he had kept no great sense of points of contact… (Vol. 22, p. 147)

[23] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 159.

There is a clearly controlled duality about this passage, which appropriately illustrates the process of the 'gradual *epoche".* As he looks back, Strether sees Woollett from his new and broader perspective, yet the force of familiar associations almost imperceptibly draws him into the accustomed habits once again, muting the critical impulse. This is the sort of ironic indulgence with which he responded to Waymarsh's manifestation of the 'sacred rage' at Chester. Culturally and morally, he fells the pull of the Woollett orbit.

However, his view of the adult Mamie, as she appears before him, produces a noticeable change:

Yes, she was *funny,* wonderful Mamie, and without dreaming it; she was bland, she was bridal - with never, that he could make out as yet, a bridegroom to support it; she was handsome and portly and easy and chatty, soft and sweet and almost disconcertingly reassuring... she had a mature manner of bending a little, as to encourage, reward, while she held neatly together in front of her a pair of strikingly polished hands... (Vol. 22, PP- 149-50)

The force of his new initiations begins to dominate, and the direct, intrusive voice of Woollett is left disregarded. Strether soon realizes that there is an unusual quality about Mamie: she is from New England, but not simply of it. She has a style of her own, a comically impressive manner of shaping her opinions and showing consideration for others. As Strether tries to fathom the phenomenon of this young woman's consciousness, the course of the conversation allows him to turn his sense of promising potentialities into concrete evidence. Mamie has not only met young Jeanne de Vionnet, she has also guessed her secret love for Chad, her strong desire to please her mother, and her uncertainties about her fiance. With an awkward but strangely moving tact, Mamie ranges over these topics, honest and unselfinterested, without the least sign of rancour that Chad should inspire such naive devotion or Jeanne feel it. After the strained and slightly sinister atmosphere in which Mme de Vionnet informed him of the engagement proposed for her daughter, Strether finds Mamie's calmness and candour a vital corrective, as well as a refreshing relief. Her 'splendour' momentarily eclipses the darker shadows of European behaviour; in his new engagement with experience, Strether can grant due recognition to Mamie's relaxed ingenuity and her spontaneous generosity. He appreciates her

uniqueness as he could never have done from either a strictly American or a strictly foreign perspective.

Nonetheless, Strether's development of his own independent method of judging oddly allows him to arrive at a fuller understanding of what is sound and valuable within Woollett culture. During his extended confrontation with Sarah Pocock, he at one point asks whether Mrs Newsome herself claims to be insulted by his recent behaviour in Paris. Sarah immediately responds on her mother's behalf:

'She has confided to my judgement and my tenderness the expression of her personal sense of everything, and the assertion of her personal dignity.' (Vol. 22, p. 203)

Rather than resenting this verbatim repetition of Mrs Newsome's ponderous delegation of responsibility to her daughter, Strether is moved at catching the tone of voice of the lady from Woollett herself. Sarah's comment brings her into presence, expresses the very resonance of her moral identity. And Strether, no longer embarrassed by Woollett's keen appraisal of him as her favoured suitor, can be touched by a certain fineness in her self-sufficiency and rigidity. This new type of respect for Woollett in general, and for Mrs Newsome in particular, also emerges in his conversation with Miss Gostrey. The images of Mrs Newsome as a ' whole moral and intellectual being or block', and 'some particularly large iceberg in a cool blue northern sea' (Vol. 22, pp. 239-40), are infused with an ironic respect when Strether handles them. Much of his self-doubt has been diffused, and he is sufficiently confident in his own method of judging to recognize the possible strengths of the New England code. He has rediscovered his heritage by ' unthinking' it, and then stepping back to examine it without the emotional charge of a reluctant personal involvement. It is, in fact, Miss Gostrey who betrays the narrower point of view in this sort of discussion; she adopts a slight air of condescension, a wryly dismissive humour. The difference between her use of irony and Strether's is the index of the distance he has travelled since his first meeting with Maria at Chester. He has found his individual mode of vision; more importantly, he has tested and proved it.

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To add a still sharper point to this account of James's predominantly philosophical orientation in *The Ambassadors,* it is important to locate it within a broader context. An illuminating parallel is provided by the approach that William Dean Howells adopts in *Indian Summer,* a work with an apparently similar focus. Contrary to the conventional critical wisdom, however, *Indian Summer* turns out to be entirely different in its informing conception. In Howells's story, Theodore Colville, a newspaper editor from Des Vaches, Indiana, returns to Florence after an absence of many years. Not unlike Strether, he is disillusioned by the type of life he has been leading in a provincial American town — although a specific professional disappointment prompts Colville's trip, and he seems to have achieved a reasonable degree of public success and influence. However, he too resolves to recapture the cultural enthusiasms of his youth; he sets out to develop his long-neglected interest in Italian art and architecture. In Florence he meets Evelina Bowen, who used to be a close friend of the American girl with whom he fell in love on his first visit to the city. The memory both of their past adventures and of Colville's crushing rejection by this girl creates a preliminary motive for resuming acquaintance. And Colville's affection and admiration for Mrs Bowen steadily increase as they rebuild their friendship. The plot is complicated, though, by Colville's introduction to young Imogene Graham, for whom Mrs Bowen is acting as a chaperon while she is abroad. As in *The Ambassadors,* the hero must try to define his relationship to these very different women, to search out the level of his own commitment in order to settle the basis for further encounters. Again like Strether, Colville passes through a series of doubts and perplexities, for he finds it no easier to grasp the nature of his own feelings than always to understand the responses or closely cherished aims of the women themselves. This atmosphere of warm and well-intentioned uncertainty leads him to form an engagement to Imogene, a change in his personal circumstances that imposes a taut strain on his relationship with Mrs Bowen. Colville's involvement in a serious accident precipitates a crisis. Imogene breaks off the engagement - at this stage to Colville's immense relief- and he is left free later to marry the widowed Mrs Bowen. He has discovered the woman whose sensitivity and charm most deeply move him; at the same time, he

and Imogene have escaped a potentially damaging and restrictive union.

So much for the plot *of Indian Summer.* But is the similarity to *The Ambassadors* more than superficial and coincidental? The openings of the two novels already begin to suggest a negative answer to this question. In the first few sentences of *Indian Summer,* Colville is presented as he lounges against the corner of a shop on the Ponte Vecchio, idly watching the surge of the flooded river beneath him. Howells takes great care to establish his atmosphere, to present Florence as the medium in which the greyness of Colville's recent experience will be dissolved; although the American editor is initially disposed to ignore the promise of personal and aesthetic renewal conveyed by his surroundings, physical details and colour tones are meticulously recorded. It is Florence that is to work the magic and to bring about the Indian summer. *The Ambassadors,* by contrast, begins with ' Strether's first question...' and ends with ' Then there we are!' And the fourth book closes with Miss Gostrey sounding this note to Strether: 'Was n't what you came out for to find out *all?'* (Vol. 21, p. 189). It is principally the process of investigation that engages James's attention; he is anxious to arrive at the essence of judging in its fullest and most complex form, to establish how meanings are won and then re-employed in the conduct of experience. This broadly philosophical preoccupation shapes the structure of his work, as much as setting the limits for its thematic content. Howells's novel is noticeably lacking in any sustained refinement of theoretical interrogation.

With regard to the treatment of physical details, Howells immediately conjures up the atmosphere of Florence, setting his characters in motion against that backdrop - and, in fact, using its plastic and historical characteristics as a means of designing his drama. Now James adopts quite a different tactic. Strether's ship docks at Liverpool, which is scarcely a city renowned for its romantic associations. And the assault on Paris proceeds by a couple of preparatory stages, via Chester and London. While there can be little doubt about the function fulfilled by Florence in *Indian Summer,* the role of Paris in James's novel presents a distinct problem. James himself provides a helpful gloss in his preface; he explains that his choice of locale was prompted by the prevalence of the vulgar and hackneyed view of Paris as a city of sin and temptation, in which established moral codes tend to disintegrate. It was, therefore,

possible for him to exploit these preconceptions, to economize in terms of both space and artistic effort, by offering Paris as the scene of Chad's liaison and Strether's subsequent mission. In effect, the French capital serves as a 'symbol for more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett'. To clinch his argument, James adds that' another surrounding scene would have done as well for our show could it have represented a place in which Strether's errand was likely to lie and his crisis to await him' {*The Art of the Novel,* p. 316). Although the statements contained in James's prefaces are not an infallible guide for reading the novels, particularly the earlier works, this seems a pertinent encapsulation of the author's sense of his fictional project. The novel is to concentrate upon the nature of a carefully selected consciousness and the patterns of its expansion, both as it bursts the bounds of old restrictions, and as it slowly and tentatively annexes fresh territory. Unlike Howells, James shows no particular fondness for the whimsical evocation of the picturesque for its own sake.

Edwin T. Bowden lucidly sums up this problem when he writes that the Paris of *The Ambassadors* is neither ' the wicked city of the popular American view' nor 'the city of reality', but 'a great poetic symbol expressing and vivifying the themes of the novel'.[24] This emphasis on the poetic qualities of James's approach suggests an important qualification and extension of the notion that this novel functions as a form of philosophical enactment. For *The Ambassadors* does not operate at a level of high and remote intellectual abstraction, while *Indian Summer* retains its concrete references and remains readily accessible to its readers. It is a case of James's doing more, rather than less, with the scenic materials at his disposal. The setting of Gloriani's garden, for instance, tucked away in an unexpected corner of Paris, accommodating its motley collection of guests under a magically clear spring sky, is the ideal context for Strether's acquisition of a wealth of new experience. The garden itself calls up a host of questions about historical background and aesthetic value which Strether must attempt to penetrate, if he is also to pursue his analysis of the potentialities of meaning contained in the social drama before him. He must sustain his awareness of the enveloping relations which, in William James's terms, distinguish 'knowledge *about'*

[24] Edwin T. Bowden, *The Themes of Henry James: A System of Observation through the Visual Arts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 101.

anything from mere acquaintance with it. At the same time, it is enough that Gloriani is an acclaimed artist, while little Bilham comes from the obscure environment of'delicate daubs', 'free discriminations', inadequate furniture, and boundless optimism (Vol. 21, pp. 126-8), for Strether to perceive a whole range of vague horizons calling for further investigation. Howells, by contrast, needs his strictly delimited facts; they go to make up the stuff of his story. The underlying logic of his portrayal depends on his evoking different views of Florence, describing the precise aspirations of a group of young painters called the 'Inglehart boys', or rehearsing the history of the Florentine *veglione.*

Insofar as the handling of matters of general philosophical interest is concerned, another significant difference between the methods of Howells and James emerges. In *Indian Summer* the weight of much of the explicit commentary on social and moral discriminations falls upon old Mr Waters, who for many years was the Unitarian minister to a small rural community in New England. However, he has resigned his calling in Emersonian fashion, and come to Europe to pursue wider and more challenging spiritual enquiries. In his discussions with Colville he displays a simple, homely and sometimes rather unworldly wisdom, which is nonetheless very astute. The following passage, in which he gently appraises the confusion of considered intention and half-selfish desire attending Colville's engagement to Imogene, gives the flavour of his insight into human failings:

'Oh, I don't know that I blame people for things. There are times when it seems as if we were all puppets, pulled this way or that, without control of our own movements. Hamlet was able to browbeat Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with his business of the pipe; but if they had been in a position to answer they might have told him that it required far less skill to play upon a man than any other instrument. Most of us, in fact, go sounding on without any special application of breath or fingers, repeating the tunes that were played originally upon other men. It appears to me that you suffered yourself to do something of the kind in this affair. We are a long time learning to act with common-sense, or even common sanity, in what are called matters of the affections. '[2B]

Yet Mr Waters's function remains largely choric; he always hovers on the periphery of the novel's action, never initiating changes in

'" William Dean Howells, *Indian Summer,* ed. Scott Bennett and David J. Nordloh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 269.

narrative pace or plot direction. If James has reservations about Maria Gostrey's factitious connection with the central line of development of *The Ambassadors,* and takes immense care to conceal his technical device, Howells evidently feels no such literary scruples with regard to Mr Waters. The old man's leisurely speculations on history and moral practice are not out of keeping with the tone of *Indian Summer;* they help to thicken the atmosphere and to elucidate the broader implications of the novel's events. Little could be further from the integrated structure of *The Ambassadors,* where the philosophical exploration and the dramatic development are inseparably fused, are effectively the same enterprise. Strether's 'Live all you can...' speech is not just detached theorizing. It is generated by the unfolding of the Woollett ambassador's adventure and the related increase in his perceptions. It cannot be fully understood out of context because it is an organic part of the novel's forward momentum, a momentum which also holds a vast number of possibilities and ambiguities in suspension. Then there is Strether's experimentation with words, values and images; this too depends absolutely upon a dramatic rendering, if the contrast between his method of judging and the prefabricated schemes preferred by other characters is to be grasped. More than that, it is only through confrontation with Sarah and Mrs Newsome, through repeated assessment and reassessment with Maria Gostrey, Chad and Mme de Vionnet, that he can evolve his unique style of interpretation. *The Ambassadors* is dialogical (even dialectical) in its very design.

While *The Ambassadors* clearly exerts a subtle authority which *Indian Summer* lacks, it is difficult to do full justice to Howells's endeavour in so brief a discussion. He handles the principal relationships of his novel with deftness and tact, often exploiting the ironic potential of Colville's predicament. In some respects, *Indian Summer* bears a close resemblance to James's earlier novels of the 'great world' (works like *The American* and *The Portrait of a Lady),* as Howells lets one of his characters notice, when she humorously comments at the author's expense that very little ever 'happens' in his fiction (p. 173). However, the purpose of this examination is to demonstrate that a superficial likeness between two stories does not automatically mean that two similar novels are involved. For the burden of *Indian Summer,* with its light mantle of nostalgia, is to suggest that one can never go back, that youth can never be recaptured. The force of *The Ambassadors,* however, is to show that it

need not be too late to go forward: to learn to see, to appreciate, and to judge. This difference in conception is borne out by the very different careers of Colville and Strether. While Colville's sensibilities deepen and mature, there is no radical change in his outlook; he becomes less hasty and impulsive, more calm and considerate. Yet for Strether a total revolution of consciousness takes place. A great distance is traversed between his wryly admiring contemplation of Waymarsh's ' sacred rage' and his final compassionate celebration of Mme de Vionnet's magnificently fallible humanity. Not only has he gained access to a previously unexplored realm of moral and cultural experience; he has 'unthought' Woollett, only to regain it in a new and more balanced measure. Most of all, he has established a uniquely individual method of judging, one which penetrates to the heart of what things mean by accepting them in the richness of their enveloping relations. Strether embodies the type of the phenomenological innovator, and he is placed at the heart of an intrinsically philosophical fiction.

IV

To round off this reading of *The Ambassadors* on the model of Husserl's theory of intentional analysis, it seems valuable to turn from the macrocosmic discussion of critical problems to the microcosm, and to concentrate upon the texture of James's thought within a short dramatic sequence. This focus on specific details again reveals the intricacy and intensity of James's method of argument, his concern for a coherence of structure which is nonetheless able, in the phenomenological spirit, to accommodate ambiguity and open-endedness. These points are well illustrated by the treatment of Strether's famous trip to the country, in which a day's solitary wandering and contemplation ends in the shock of his unexpected encounter with Chad and Mme de Vionnet at the inn beside the Seine (Vol. 22, pp. 245-66).

When Strether leaves the train, he has the impression of entering the frame surrounding a small Lambinet painting which he had many years before admired at a Boston gallery. The landscape with its appealing composition of trees and river, and its gentle play of light, seems to correspond very closely to the tired ambassador's recollection of the picture. In his commentary on this episode, Charles R. Anderson emphasizes James's inverted use of the mirror

image; for the novelist has transposed the normal procedure of comparing a representational painting with the landscape it depicts, so that its 'faithful[ness] to nature' may be assessed.[26] Although Anderson skates hastily over the ticklish question of what may be said to constitute 'faithful' pictorial representation, his insight calls attention to the complicated relationship which James has set up between ordinary experience and its artistic interpretation. In fact, the starting point for this examination is not the Lambinet painting itself, but Strether's memory of it; from a phenomenological point of view, everything is thus perceived under the modality of memory. Moreover, the ambassador does not merely lose himself in the soothing charm of the countryside. He is so sensitive to his surroundings because they represent 'a scene and a stage', a context in which the recent events of his mission may be spread out and re-explored (Vol. 22, p. 253). So the French landscape paradoxically appears to contain and redeliver not only the Boston gallery, but also his newly-found mode of discourse with Mme de Vionnet, the strains and uncertainties of his dealings with the second Woollett embassy - even an implicit contrast with Woollett itself. There is a sense in which Strether is, in fact, painting his own Lambinet landscape, loading it with the tones of his own feelings and intimately personal remembrance.[27] The phenomenology of imaginative constitution and projection comes vividly into play as an analytical mechanism.

However, there is a very subtle shift in the nature of James's writing. As Strether advances further and further into the framed picture-world, the terms of description seem to become less those of the Barbizon school, and more those of the Impressionists. Objects lose their firm outline and conventional perspective, while colours, lights and shades begin to dominate.[28] The following passage shows this breaking up of Strether's surroundings into the details of their characteristic colours and compelling features, although it is important to appreciate that there is no awkward hiatus in the sequence of the narrative. It is rather that particular emphasis is placed upon

[26] Charles R. Anderson, *Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1977), pp. 267-8.

[27] For a fuller treatment of the consequences of Strether's entry into his picture-world, see David Lodge, 'Strether by the River', in *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 195-6, and Stowell, *Literary Impressionism,* pp. 214-16.

[28] See Winner, *Henry James and the Visual Arts,* pp. 74-8, and Charles R. Anderson, *Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels,* pp. 269-75.

what Strether *sees,* just as it takes shape before his eyes in the immediacy of its emotional and aesthetic impact.

> He really continued in the picture - that being for himself his situation - all the rest of this rambling day; so that the charm was still, was indeed more than ever upon him when, toward six o'clock, he found himself amicably engaged with a stout white-capped deep-voiced woman at the door of the *auberge* of the biggest village, a village that affected him as a thing of whiteness, blueness and crookedness, set in coppery green, and that had the river flowing behind or before it - one could n't say which, at the bottom, in particular, of the inn-garden. He had had other adventures before this; had kept along the height, after shaking off slumber; had admired, had almost coveted, another small old church, all steep roof and dim slate-colour without and all whitewash and paper flowers within; had lost his way and had found it again; had conversed with rustics who struck him perhaps a little more as men of the world than he had expected; had acquired at a bound a fearless facility in French; had had, as the afternoon waned, a watery *bock,* all pale and Parisian, in the cafe of the furthest village, which was not the biggest; and had meanwhile not once overstepped the oblong gilt frame. (Vol. 22, pp. 251-2)

In this description of the latter part of Strether's ramble, James sustains the tension between the patterns of artistic representation and the flow of ordinary experience. While the reality of the white-washed, slate-roofed church, with its display of paper flowers, is almost more picturesque and enchanting than any artistic image might have led Strether to believe, the knowingness of the rustics separates the idealization of fiction from fact. Yet there is a fairy-tale quality about Strether's sudden fluency in French, which presents an instant and unimpeded matching of desire and realization. As for the beer, ' all pale and Parisian' — that captures an intermediate level at which the fancifully projected expectation is satisfyingly met by the event. Although Strether has granted himself a day's holiday, the relaxation of his involvement with his routine responsibilities does not entail a lapse in attentiveness. Because he is relaxed, he proves the more receptive to the flux of engaging impressions which greets him. Strether is still very much concerned with the search for meaning, with establishing how phenomena are to be grasped and interpreted. Each phase of his walk presents him with a fresh noema, an object in the full context of its enveloping relations; and Strether delights not only in probing the noematic core, but also in slowly, almost self-indulgently, unfolding the horizons that will lead him on to still newer experiences. At the same time, the Woollett ambassador is

acutely sensitive to the stream of his own subjective processes. He immerses himself not only in his calmly contemplative frame of mind, but also in examining the underlying reasons for this resolution of his guilt and uncertainty. The process of intentional analysis continues throughout the day as memory, landscape and aesthetic values are brought into a complex and rapidly changing set of orientations. The novel becomes a textbook exploration of philosophical processes in both its accuracy and its thoroughness.

The experience of the country interlude is, at the same time, particularly important for Strether, because it gives him a new purchase on his European career. It allows him to retreat from the immediacy of his Parisian education and to endow it with a different context; for he is able to relate Paris and Woollett through a third term which is characteristically French, yet which also reflects the cultural aspirations of Boston. By regarding his setting as ' a scene and a stage', he embarks upon the ' imaginative variation' which is one of the strongest interpretative tools of intentional analysis. In his mind's eye clusters of events regroup themselves, characters adopt various attitudes - and Strether is free to scrutinize these interactions at his leisure, to try to extract the essential meaning from his discoveries and his confusions. Once again, his dual capacity for detachment and commitment proves a shaping psychological strength. On the one hand, he is aware of the need to withdraw and assess the validity of the available evidence; on the other, it gives him a richness and vitality of perception which encourages him to embrace a wide range of human possibilities.

It is under the influence of his gathering confidence in his own capacity forjudging that Strether sees the boat containing Chad and Mme de Vionnet float into view.

> For two very happy persons he found himself straightway taking them - a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place and, being acquainted with the neighbourhood, had known what this particular retreat could offer them. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent - that this would n't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt... (Vol. 22, p. 256)

Because the ambassador is relaxed and pensive, the pace of his reflection is slow and easy. And he takes in a wealth of detail: the expressive physical attitudes of the young couple, their colourful

contribution to the landscape, and the emotional atmosphere that radiates from them. Strether extracts an enormous amount of information from a very simple spectacle; he does not limit himself to aesthetic appreciation, nor to registering the mere surface of social manners. He competently and contentedly reads the signs which are given out by two young lovers, happily absorbed in each other's company while visiting their favourite haunts. There is none of the awkward self-doubting which attended his commentary on the 'sacred rage'; instead the perceptions are delivered up whole and critically formed.

With the revelation that the charming young couple are actually Chad and Mme de Vionnet, the scene decomposes and distorts. Yet this does not crudely call in question the validity and effectiveness of Strether's sense of discrimination. He has gauged quite accurately, on the basis of the empirical evidence, the quality of the relationship between these two people; it is only when he identifies them specifically as the partners to the 'virtuous attachment' that his poise deserts him. But even under the pressure of this shock, there is not an automatic reversion to the standards of Woollett. Instead Strether finds the occurrence 'as queer as fiction, as farce' (Vol. 22, p. 257), and occupies himself philosopher-fashion, despite his disorientation, with trying to fit the pieces into a provisional pattern which may reflect the changed circumstances. Although he has been alarmingly confronted with the magnitude of his misconception about the 'virtuous attachment', he does not abandon his attempt to understand. Characteristically, his dual consciousness comes to his aid. During the rest of the evening he queasily, half-unwillingly, gathers further fragments of information, which can later be tried in various positions within the jigsaw.

To round off this argument, Strether's final interview with Mme de Vionnet endorses the Tightness of his initial, shrewdly observed impression of the charming but anonymous young pair in the boat. Little Bilham's lie about the 'virtuous attachment' - insofar as it was a lie in any but the narrowest sense of words - proves to have been merely a ' technical' one (Vol. 22, p. 299). This is not to deny that the moment of revelation at the old pavilion on the Seine casts a shadow back across the peacefulness of Strether's wanderings in the country. Yet this darkening is implicit from the moment that he treats the landscape as 'a scene and a stage', which he animates with reconstructions of his past experience. At the same time, the force of

the ambassador's last meeting with Marie de Vionnet is also to confirm the darkening, as much as to dispel it. For under a certain aspect of her personality, Mme de Vionnet is the frightened maidservant, 'crying for her young man', rather than the graceful *youngfemme du monde* enjoying an outing with her handsome admirer. And that handsome admirer is also the Chad with a keen interest in advertising, who over-eagerly professes that he is not tired of the woman who has so greatly influenced his personal transformation. Throughout the novel there is an interplay of retension and protension, a double-edged reference back and forth, in which an element of valuable knowledge may be salvaged even from misinterpretations, while sound assumptions are qualified and controlled by the growth of a fuller understanding.

What Strether's country interlude clearly illustrates is that meanings are not simply given fully-fledged and ready-made. Merleau-Ponty provides a helpful synopsis of the processes of search and discovery which are enacted in the novel, when he writes that

> expressive speech does not simply choose a sign for an already denned signification, as one goes to look for a hammer in order to drive a nail or for a claw to pull it out. It gropes around a significative intention which is not guided by any text, and which is precisely in the process of writing the text.[29]

In this way, Strether's oscillation between his memory of the Lambinet painting and the elements of the French countryside enables him to paint his own landscape, one which is also saturated with his recent recollections of his ambassadorial mission. Perhaps a closer analogy with such formative processes would lie in Merleau-Ponty's adoption of Saussure's distinction between *la langue* (or language, as the stock of available words, together with the various phonological, morphological and syntactical rules which guide their use) and *la parole* (or truly expressive acts of speech). As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the institution of each genuinely fresh expression 'shake[s] the chain' of familiar language in a unique manner; the innovative insight depends upon the established system for its raw materials, yet its realization immediately enriches and transforms the existing linguistic structures ('Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', p. 46). At the same time, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that a process of'sedimentation' takes place. The newly-won signification subtly passes into the culture both of its originator and of those with

[29] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', in *Signs,* p. 46.

whom he communicates, so that it will in future appear as a readily accessible formulation, which may be readopted at will.[30]

There are, of course, obvious differences between language as a widely accepted, coherently available system and Strether's accumulation of a stock of manipulable meanings: notions like 'the *femme du monde',* 'being a gentleman', 'being a Pagan', 'the virtuous attachment', or 'the technical lie'. Yet all these concepts arise out of a more generalized context of socially accepted usages; and once Strether has subjected them to the pressure of his intense scrutiny and made them his own, they serve as constant reference points for his continuing enquiries. These ideas give him a stable foundation which anchors his sense of change. In a similar way, Strether's brief holiday in the country allows him to refract much of his collection of established significations through the medium of his response to the landscape, and so to revise or settle his conclusions. The totally unexpected appearance of Chad and Mme de Vionnet in the boat on the river vividly - almost literally - illustrates how the sudden apprehension of a new meaning can 'shake the chain' of familiarly grounded signs. Strether's shock and feeling of disorientation point to the stress of rearranging an existing structure of interpretation to meet the demands of a radically altered relationship with the world, and with the possibilities of experience which it suggests. Yet Strether's reorganization of his complex of ideas does not entail the annihilation of his old terms, nor the necessary reversal of their original function. Instead, he gains access to a range of ambiguities and refined nuances which he had not previously anticipated or imagined. Moreover, the final encounters with Marie de Vionnet and Chad Newsome put his rearranged system to the test, proving it, modifying it, and endorsing it. So Strether has his little adventure in the field of linguistic philosophy, also.

From this point of view, Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'style' suggests another helpful analogy with the evolution of Strether's talent for judging and coining descriptive terms. Merleau-Ponty considers the moment at which style 'germinates at the surface of the artist's experience', while he searches for the emblems which will enable him to disengage a latent but insistently nagging meaning, to give it the concrete embodiment that will make it accessible both to himself and to others. At this stage, the philosopher suggests, style is

[30] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'On the Phenomenology of Language', in *Signs,* pp. 91-2.

not a 'certain number of procedures or tics' that the artist can inventory, but a concentrated reaching out towards the fulfilment of expression. It is 'the universal index of the "coherent deformation" by which he concentrates the still scattered meaning of his perception and makes it exist expressly' ('Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', pp. 52-5). Style can, therefore, be seen as a register of the interaction between the painter and the world in which he lives and exercises his creative activity. It yields the complex of meanings which he has uncovered, and articulated into an internally consistent and individually satisfying system. It records the generation of these meanings from the unity of his experience, a unity in which perception and interpretation are indissolubly fused.

In the light of this proposal, *The Ambassadors* embodies the growth and refinement of Strether's characteristic style: the novel plots his search, not for single, isolated meanings, but for the 'coherent deformation' which will express his response to the series of increasingly complicated situations through which he advances. He becomes the artist as philosopher. James shows the slow and belated, but deeply rewarding, flowering of his latent capacity for judging. For Strether, the process of evaluation is not a distant and clinical contemplation of the available evidence; it calls upon the full resources of his experience of a challenging 'life-world' and of his engaged compassion. The originality and ingenuity with which he finally arranges the different elements of his pattern, in order to achieve a fully-integrated structure of vision, can be gauged by the effect he produces upon his companions. Miss Gostrey watches his experiments with sympathetic wonder, Chad's attitude is one of uneasiness and reluctant admiration, Sarah Pocock is simply, and monumentally, affronted. And this complex of reactions, in its turn, contributes to the 'coherent deformation' realized by the novel as a whole; it is this interpenetration of varying perspectives which lends such fullness to James's fictional exploration of the challenge of judging. A concise summary of these intricate relationships might, in fact, take the following form: if the course of Strether's education presents judging as personal-cum-philosophical style, then the novel itself is style as a concrete embodiment of the trajectory of the process of judging.

Yet these concluding formulations require a final glossing. When Strether withdraws into the French countryside for his holiday outing, he becomes increasingly self-aware, just as the novel seems to

become increasingly self-conscious in its invocation of the vocabulary of painting, fiction and theatricality. James nudges a body of key premises into the foreground for more explicit evaluation. But self-criticism is a highly problematic undertaking. As Irene E. Harvey points out, as shrewd a theorist as Derrida has to keep rewriting his critique of the Western concept of reason, in order to prevent his attempted demonstrations from lapsing into the merely irrational — and, therefore, the incomprehensible by reason. Trying to describe a process of thinking in the same instant as it is exposing itself through a given statement would be like trying to perform a phenomenological reduction upon the phenomenological reduction itself. This is, of course, where the energy of *differance,* the endless differing of meanings and deferment of absolute fulfilment, makes itself felt. In these circumstances, Derrida's tactic is to use his terminology 'strategically': that is, 'structurally rather than "literally"'. A simple, descriptive *'is* structure' is superseded by an allusive and metaphorical *'as* structure'.[31]

In this way, Strether, too, engages in a series of imaginative experiments with judging, because this is the only possible means of judging the judgement itself, of assessing in principle the complicated intellectual manoeuvres to which he has committed himself. The artist-philosopher acquires the status of meta-philosopher. Moreover, his 'scene' and 'stage' serve as reminders of the fictionality of James's philosophical novel; the microcosm of Strether's *'as* structure' illuminates the deep complexity of James's carefully plotted '*is* structure'. While implicitly acknowledging the play *of differance, The Ambassadors* sets out to make its presentation of the dynamics of judging both comprehensive and intricately self-critical. Strether's half-triumphant and half-regretful closing words to Maria Gostrey — 'Then there we are!' (Vol. 22, p. 326) - not only mark the climax of his creative achievement, but also precipitate his release into yet another cycle of uncertainties and provisional appraisals on his return to Woollett.

[31] Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of'Differance'* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 155.