

ANALYSIS

The Ambassadors (1903)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

“Frankly, quite the best, ‘all round,’ of my productions.”

Henry James

“The scenario is interesting, but it does not promise a popular novel. The tissues of it are too subtly fine for general appreciation. It is subjective, fold within fold of a complex mental web, in which the reader is lost if his much-wearied attention falters. A good proportion of the characters are American, but the scene is chiefly in Paris. The story (in its mere plot) centres about an American youth in Paris who has been captivated by a charming French woman (separated from her husband) and the critical situations are developed in connection with the efforts of his friends and relatives to rescue him. The moral in the end is that he is better off in this captivity than in the conditions to which his friends would restore him. I do not advise acceptance. We ought to do better.”

H. M. Alden

Memorandum on “Project of Novel by Henry James” (1902)
(Harper & Brothers)

“James makes an ironic study of the ‘deteriorating’ influence of Europe’s ‘wickedness’ on Americans. ‘Chad’ Newsome refuses to come back from Paris to Woollett, Mass., to take care of his legitimate business; his widowed mother, a woman of wealth and social position, suspects the worst. She sends two ambassadors to find out what’s wrong and bring her son home. The first, Lambert Strether, who is about to marry Mrs. Newsome, is himself seduced by the charm of France and is convinced that Chad’s relationship with Mme. de Vionnet is entirely virtuous. Then Mrs. Newsome sends her daughter Sarah, who sees through it all, demands that her brother return at once, and tells Strether that all is over between him and her mother. Although Strether, by accident, then learns that everything charged against Chad and his ‘friend’ is true, he still believes Chad should stay, but goes back to America himself. The entire action is skillfully and slowly revealed through Strether’s mind. James considered *The Ambassadors* his best book, its essence being summed in a remark by Strether, ‘Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to.’”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“Lambert Strether, an intelligent, conscientious American editor, is sent by his wealthy fiancée, Mrs. Newsome, a rigorously conventional Massachusetts widow, to Paris to bring home her son Chad, who has spent several years in Europe and is now required to take charge of the family’s business interests. She has been unable to learn why Chad chooses to remain abroad, and when Strether arrives he discovers the young man much changed by his Old World environment and his relations with the charming, cultured Countess de Vionnet, who later appears to be Chad’s mistress.

Gradually Strether comes to realize the fascinations and satisfactions that life offers in Paris but not in Woollett, Mass., and he virtually gives up his mission. Then a new group of ambassadors is sent after him, including Chad’s aggressively proper sister Mrs. Pocock; her husband, Jim; and Jim’s appealing but inexperienced young sister Mamie, who has been expected to marry Chad. Their arguments are supplemented by those of Strether’s American friend Waymarsh, and the situation becomes comic, for none of these people can comprehend the education that has reformed Chad and Strether. Chad’s determination to remain in Paris is unmoved, but Strether’s conscience is reawakened, and he is persuaded to return to America, even though this will end his attachment to the quiet, kindly Maria Gostrey, an

expatriate who has been a sympathetic spectator of his cultural adventure and the comedy of contrasted manners it has involved.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“And now for the method by which the picture of a mind is fully dramatized, the method which is to be seen consistently applied in *The Ambassadors* and the other later novels of Henry James. How is the author to withdraw, to stand aside, and to let Strether’s thought tell its own story?... The world of silent thought is thrown open, and instead of telling the reader what happened there, the novelist uses the look and behavior of thought as the vehicle by which the story is rendered. Just as the writer of a play embodies his subject in visible action and audible speech, so the novelist, dealing with a situation like Strether’s, represents it by means of the movement that flickers over the surface of his mind... We watch the thought itself, the hidden thing, as it twists to and fro in his brain--watch it without any other aid to understanding but such as its own manner of bearing may supply. The novelist, more free than the playwright, could of course tell us, if he chose, what lurks behind this agitated spirit; he could step forward and explain the restless appearance of the man’s thought. But if he prefers the dramatic way, admittedly the more effective, there is nothing to prevent him from taking it....

He no longer sees a misguided young man to be saved from disaster, he sees an exquisite, bountiful world laid at a young man’s feet; and now the only question is whether the young man is capable of meeting and grasping his opportunity. He is incapable, as it turns out; when the story ends he is on the verge of rejecting his freedom and going back to the world of commonplace; Strether’s mission has ended successfully. But in Strether’s mind the revolution is complete; there is nothing left for him, no reward and no future. The world of commonplace is no longer his world, and he is too late to seize the other; he is old, he has missed the opportunity of youth.... It is a purely pictorial subject, covering Strether’s field of vision and bounded by its limits; it consists entirely of an impression received by a certain man. There can accordingly be no thought of rendering him as a figure seen from without; nothing that any one else could discern, looking at him and listening to his conversation, would give the full sense of the eventful life he is leading within....

Nothing in the scene has any importance, any value in itself; what Strether sees in it--that is the whole of its meaning.... To bring his mind into view at the different moments, one after another, when it is brushed by new experience--to make a little scene of it, without breaking into hidden depths where the change of purpose is proceeding--to multiply these glimpses until the silent change is apparent, though no word has actually been said of it: this is Henry James’s way, and though the method could scarcely be more devious and roundabout, always refusing the short cut, yet by these very qualities and precautions finally produces the most direct impression, for the reader has seen. That is why the method is adopted. The author has so fashioned his book that his own part in the narration is now unobtrusive to the last degree; he, the author, could not imaginably figure there more discreetly....

In these scenic dialogues, on the whole, we seem to have edged away from Strether’s consciousness. He sees, and we with him; but when he talks it is almost as though we were outside him and away from him altogether. Not always, indeed; for in many of the scenes he is busily brooding and thinking throughout, and we share his mind while he joins in the talk. But still, on the whole, the author is inclined to leave Strether alone when the scene is set.... Henry James, by his method, can secure this effect of drama, even though his Strether is apparently in the position of a narrator throughout. Strether’s are the eyes... But the author, who all through the story has been treating Strether’s consciousness as a play, as an action proceeding, can at any moment use his talk almost as though the source from which it springs were unknown to us....

When the story passes from these to the scenes of dialogue--from the silent drama of Strether’s meditation to the spoken drama of the men and women--there is thus no break in the method. The same law rules everywhere--that Strether’s changing sense of the situation shall appeal directly to the onlooker and not by way of any summarizing picture-maker. And yet as a whole the book is all pictorial, an indirect impression received through Strether’s intervening consciousness, beyond which the story never strays. I

conclude that on this paradox the art of dramatizing the picture of somebody's experience...touches its limit. There is indeed no further for it to go. "

Percy Lubbock
"Point of View in *The Ambassadors*"
The Craft of Fiction
(Viking 1921,1954) 156-71

"Let us examine at some length another book of the rigid type, a book with a unity, and in this sense an easy book, although it is by Henry James. We shall see in it pattern triumphant, and we shall also be able to see the sacrifices an author must make if he wants his pattern and nothing else to triumph. *The Ambassadors*...is the shape of an hour-glass. Strether and Chad...change places, and it is the realization of this that makes the book so satisfying at the close.

The plot is elaborate and subtle, and proceeds by action or conversation or meditation through every paragraph. Everything is planned, everything fits; none of the minor characters are just decorative...they elaborate on the main theme, they work. The final effect is pre-arranged, dawns gradually on the reader, and is completely successful when it comes. Details of intrigue, of the various missions from America, may be forgotten, but the symmetry they have created is enduring.

Strether is a typical James character--he recurs in nearly all the books and is an essential part of their construction. He is the observer who tries to influence the action, and who through his failure to do so gains extra opportunities for observation. And the other characters are such as an observer like Strether is capable of observing--through lenses procured from a rather too first-class oculist. Everything is adjusted to his vision, yet he is not a quietist--no, that is the strength of the device; he takes us along with him, we move as well as look on....

Behind Paris, interpreting it for Chad, is the adorable and exalted figure of Mme. de Vionnet. It is now impossible for Strether to proceed. All that is noble and refined in life concentrates in Mme. de Vionnet and is reinforced by her pathos. She asks him not to take Chad away. He promises--without reluctance, for his own heart has already shown him as much--and he remains in Paris not to fight it but to fight for it. For the second batch of ambassadors now arrives from the New World. Mrs. Newsome, incensed and puzzled by the unseemly delay, has dispatched Chad's sister, his brother-in-law, and Mamie, the girl whom he is supposed to marry. The novel now becomes, within its ordained limits, most amusing. There is a superb set-to between Chad's sister and Mme. de Vionnet, while as for Mamie--here is disastrous Mamie, seen as we see all things, through Strether's eyes....

Chad will tire of the exquisite Frenchwoman, she is part of his fling; he will go back to his mother and make the little domestic article and marry Mamie. They know all this, and it is revealed to Strether though they try to hide it; they lie, they are vulgar--even Mme. de Vionnet, even her pathos, once so exquisite, is stained with commonness.... So Strether loses them too. As he says: 'I have lost everything--it is my only logic.' It is not that they have gone back. It is that he has gone on. The Paris they revealed to him--he could reveal it to them now, if they had eyes to see, for it is something finer than they could ever notice for themselves, and his imagination has more spiritual value than their youth. The pattern of the hour-glass is complete; he and Chad have changed places...

The beauty that suffuses *The Ambassadors* is the reward due to a fine artist for hard work. James knew exactly what he wanted, he pursued the narrow path of aesthetic duty, and success to the full extent of his possibilities has crowned him. The pattern has woven itself with modulation and reservations Anatole France will never attain. Woven itself wonderfully. But at what sacrifice! So enormous is the sacrifice that many readers cannot get interested in James, although they can follow what he says (his difficulty has been much exaggerated), and can appreciate his effects. They cannot grant his premise, which is that most of human life has to disappear before he can do us a novel.

He has, in the first place, a very short list of characters. I have already mentioned two--the observer who tries to influence the action, and the second-rate outsider... Then there is the sympathetic foil--very lively and frequently female--in *The Ambassadors* Maria Gostrey plays this part; there is the wonderful rare

heroine, whom Mme. de Vionnet approached and who is consummated by Milly in *The Wings of the Dove*; there is sometimes a villain, sometimes a young artist with generous impulses; and that is about all. For so fine a novelist it is a poor show.

In the second place, the characters, beside being few in number, are constructed on very stingy lines. They are incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality, and of nine-tenths of heroism. Their clothes will not take off, the diseases that ravage them are anonymous, like the sources of their income, their servants are noiseless or resemble themselves, no social explanation of the world we know is possible for them, for there are no stupid people in their world, no barriers of language, and no poor. Even their sensations are limited. They can land in Europe and look at works of art and at each other, but that is all. Maimed creatures can alone breathe in Henry James's pages--maimed yet specialized. They remind one of the exquisite deformities who haunted Egyptian art in the reign of Akhenaton--huge heads and tiny legs, but nevertheless charming. In the following reign they disappear....

There is no philosophy in the novels, no religion (except an occasional touch of superstition), no prophecy, no benefit for the superhuman at all. It is for the sake of a particular aesthetic effect which is certainly gained, but at this heavy price.... It is this question of the rigid pattern: hour-glass or grand chain or converging lines of the cathedral or diverging lines of the Catherine wheel, or bed of Procrustes--whatever image you like as long as it implies unity. Can it be combined with the immense richness of material which life provides? Wells and James would agree it cannot, Wells would go on to say that life should be given the preference, and must not be whittled or distended for a pattern's sake. My own prejudices are with Wells. The James novels are a unique possession and the reader who cannot accept his premises misses some valuable and exquisite sensations. But I do not want more of his novels, especially when they are written by some one else, just as I do not want the art of Akhenaton to extend into the reign of Tutankhamen."

E. M. Forster
Aspects of the Novel
(Harcourt 1927,1955) 218-34

"What caused James' preference for the book was not its theme, but its roundness of structure. On the same grounds of 'architectural' competence his second favorite was *The Portrait of a Lady*.... James had always been uneasy--as well he might have been!--with his age's demand for serialized fiction. But here for once he felt a great stimulus to his ingenuity, and he laid out his novel organically in twelve books, each of which could serve for a month's installment. His subject was well fitted to such treatment, since it consisted in Strether's gradual initiation into a world of new values, and a series of small climaxes could therefore best articulate this hero's successive discoveries.

What concerned James in this structure was also his principal contribution to the art of the novel, his development in Strether of a center of consciousness. What Strether sees is the entire content, and James thus perfected a device both for framing and for interpreting experience.... Since if every detail must be observed and analyzed by Strether, we obtain a heightened singleness of vision. We obtain both 'the large unity' and 'the grace of intensity' which James held to be the final criteria for a novel. His contribution here has been fully assessed by critics, and has been assimilated in varying degrees by many subsequent novelists. Indeed, some have gone so far as to declare *The Ambassadors* the most skillfully planned novel ever written. The chief reminder we need now is that there is a vast difference between James' method and that of the novels of 'the stream of consciousness.' That phrase was used by William James in his *Principles of Psychology*, but in his brother's novels there is none of the welling up of the darkly subconscious life that has characterized the novel since Freud....

Strether introduces into his version of this declaration for life [the challenge to live!] a highly complex image, which serves to reveal his Puritan heritage. It is the image of life as a tin mould, be it plain or fluted and poured by 'the great cook.' In this way Strether symbolizes the illusion of free will: the form of the individual consciousness has been predetermined and limited, not, to be sure, by the Puritans' God, but by every force in the individual's background and environment. Yet Strether insists that we make the most of life by enjoying our illusion, that we should act as though we were free. James had already shown his concern with such a philosophical theme in *The Portrait of a Lady*....

What Strether awakened to in Paris was not unlike the aesthetic experience that [Henry] Adams came finally to know only as he discovered the beauty of the cathedrals. Strether keeps emphasizing the importance of seeing, and we know that James himself lived in large measure by his eyes. He developed very early the feeling that intense life concentrated itself into scenes of which he was the absorbed spectator. This was to mean that of the two types into which Yeats divides artists, those who, like Blake, celebrate their own immediate share in the energy that 'is eternal delight,' and those who, like Keats, give us a poignant sense of being separated from what they present, James belonged to the latter. He described his own early romantic longing for 'otherness' in terms very close to those Yeats was to use for Keats....

The perfected instance of his belief that the novelist should 'catch the colour of life' is the way he initiates both Strether and the reader into Paris. His accuracy of presentation is such that he can really suggest the quality of Chad's existence through the very look of his house, 'its cold fair grey, warmed and polished a little by life.' James makes such a magnificently functional use of his architectural details that his hero is persuaded--and thousands of his countrymen have had the same yearning belief--that the life which goes on behind those windows and that balcony must also be characterized by tact and taste... Here he has come to the essence, not of Sargent's effects but of Renoir's, in the wonderful sense of open air; in the sensuous relish of all the surfaces, with exactly the right central spot of color in that *omelette aux tomates*; in the exquisite play of light around his figures. And when James added a further accent, it made for the very kind of charm by which the Impressionists declared their art a release from stuffy manners as well as from stale techniques: Madame de Vionnet 'was a woman who, between courses, could be graceful with her elbows on the table. It was a posture unknown to Mrs. Newsome'....

What he chose to frame, specially selected though it is, takes on an intensity to the degree that he could realize the multiple kinds of seeing in which he had striven to perfect himself, and could demonstrate that he had mastered 'the art of reflection' in both senses of that phrase--both as a projector of the luminous surfaces of life, and as an interpreter of their significance. Perhaps the most brilliant instance of this double skill in all James' work is the recognition scene on the river, a scene which reveals also his extraordinary awareness of how art frames experience.... The skill with which James has held our eyes within his frame has so heightened the significance of every slight detail that such a recognition scene leaps out with the force of the strongest drama. What Strether has seen comes to him as a great shock, but it does not cause him to waver in his judgment of how much Chad has improved. What he is anxious about now is whether Chad is really worthy of what Madame de Vionnet has given him, and there are plenty of undeveloped hints at the close that he is not, that he is already restive, that he will not be happy permanently without the business world, and that he may even soon be turning to a young woman....

[James] had posited his hero's sense that it was too late for him to live; and had reinforced this with Strether's New England scrupulosity that in siding with Chad his conscience should be clear, since there was to be 'nothing in it for himself.' And no matter how bewilderingly iridescent he finds the jewel-image of Paris, since 'what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next,' Strether never loses his moral sense.... The burden of *The Ambassadors* is that Strether has awakened to a wholly new sense of life. Yet he does nothing at all to fulfill that sense. Therefore, fond as James is of him, we cannot help feeling his relative emptiness.... Madame de Vionnet's end also is to be tragic. She has learned from life that no real happiness comes from taking: 'the only safe thing is to give.' Such a nature is far too good for Chad, and she realizes now that 'the only certainty' for the future is that she will be 'the loser in the end.' Her positive suffering and loss are far more affecting than Strether's tenuous renunciation."

F. O. Matthiessen
Henry James: The Major Phase
(Oxford 1944) 19-41

"As the Notebooks show, James had found the germ of his story in a reported glimpse of [William Dean] Howells in Paris, 'virtually in the evening' of his life and sadly aware of being too old to take advantage of what he saw for the first time. But what the 'little situation' turned into was a drama not merely of the loss of experience but of the gain of knowledge. And though Maria Gostrey has been Strether's mentor, he, the pupil, has outdistanced her....

The task for which Strether has been sent to Paris resembles the traditional test which the fairy prince has to pass before he wins the hand of the princess.... Although James never lost his deep moral bias, the special value of his vision derives ultimately from his detachment from any one local point of view. This detachment prevented him from the kind of simplification which sees the world in black and white and led him finally to see the contrast between America and Europe in certain fundamental qualities which, not in themselves good or bad, contain the potentials for both. Ultimately this contrast came for him to lie in the very sources of moral judgment; in the difference between idealism and empiricism, between the laws of conduct which the individual derives from the sense of his independent relation to God and, on the other hand, the rules derived from the needs of social life and formalized in certain institutions and conventions of society. If he had come to see dangers inherent in the moral self-reliance of Americans, Europe had taught him not merely the reality of moral corruption which may be hidden under the decor of art and social form, but also the moral significance of style, beauty, order....

International contrasts came to serve him as a means for exploring a more fundamental question--the nature of morality 'as regards the human race at large.' Yet, though the three climactic novels of his career--*The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904)--transcend what he called the 'emphasized internationalism' of his early fiction, they nevertheless mark his return to the international scene.... Taken together, the three novels form a trilogy exploring the possibilities of two radically different systems of morality represented by America and Europe. And coming just before his return to America in 1904, which led him to readjust his focus, they constitute a climax in his lifelong attempt to define his sense of the fundamental differences between the two worlds....

By this time, too, James had fully developed his late method: the author is abstracted from the text, and the story is wholly a story of individual consciousness--the characters' story of their story. Consequently, the international contrast has now ceased to be given in terms of an external conflict alone. Instead it is presented in terms of the growth of individual awareness--Strether's awareness of Parisian, Milly's awareness of English, or Densher's of American modes of life. The novels, therefore, picture in the first place, not Europe and America, but the American experience of Europe, the European experience of America. They are novels of initiation and conversion...

Lambert Strether, the hero, is the one among all of James's important characters one is most tempted to identify with his author. The reason is not far to seek: *The Ambassadors* is a story of the making of an American cosmopolitan and in this sense may be regarded as a kind of spiritual autobiography. The action is of course fictitious; in fact it has something of the fable or fairy tale, the form which more and more became James's medium for projecting what he saw as psychological and moral realities.... About the theme of no other of his fictions did James commit himself so bluntly as about that of *The Ambassadors*. 'Nothing is more easy than to state the subject'--thus his preface opens, and before the end of the page he has quoted Strether's crucial speech in Gloriani's garden in Chapter XI as an expression of 'the essence' of the novel: 'Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life'....

What happens in the end he sees with a new clarity and sharpness of vision is not only Paris but Woollett itself, represented by the human symbols of Madame de Vionnet and Mrs. Newsome. The problem confronting Strether is the question whether Chad's attachment to Madame de Vionnet represents, as Woollett believes, the breakdown of his morals or whether, as one of Chad's young friends tells Strether, it is 'virtuous.' The 'virtuous attachment' becomes the focal point in which the various themes meet: the question of morality, the question of the lived life, and the international contrast. Strether's [transformation] is made in a succession of two or three appraisals of what is appearance and what reality. To summarize the sequence of his adjustments briefly, what strikes him at his very first meeting with Chad is a tremendous improvement in the young man's appearance. Instead of being coarsened by the process of sowing his wild oats, he seems of unexceptionable taste and manners, even of a dignity which can momentarily affect the older man with a kind of awe....

Strether's conclusion is that Chad's attachment to Madame de Vionnet is 'virtuous.' It is a pragmatic conclusion drawn from Chad's 'improvement' and from Madame de Vionnet's own charm and beauty... In a word, Madame de Vionnet is simply the most exquisite of women.... The irony of Strether's predicament

is that Sarah's view turns out to have been right as far as the mere physical facts are concerned. For the second step in Strether's initiation is his sudden discovery of what Chad's relations to Madame de Vionnet really are.... That he should have arrived at a point where his moral superiority has vanished, is hard to swallow.... This is a far cry from the moral absolutism of Woollett—"to make deception right".... What has from the first acted as the wedge to loosen Strether's old beliefs has been his sense of the outward transformation of Chad. What makes him see virtue even in the affair as it is finally revealed to him is the person of Madame de Vionnet. Strether has quite simply become a pragmatist....

The Woollett vision of Chad's imbroglio, from which Strether emancipates himself, is naive, is a manifestation of the old American 'innocence,' though what James emphasizes this time is its negative aspect.... What all this comes to is that the whole Woollett tribe indulge their own pleasure and their own preconceptions. They all exemplify in their various ways what...James calls the 'passionless pilgrims' among the Americans, who regarded Europe as a toy to be used and discarded at will.... The Chad who threatens to exchange Madame de Vionnet for the refinements of advertising, Strether realizes, is precisely the old Chad, and this last touch supplies the link which completes the chain of Strether's insights. For the last thing to which his eyes are opened is Woollett itself. The most important symbol of Woollett is the distant figure of Mrs. Newsome, just as Madame de Vionnet is the most important symbol of Paris. And the transfer of Strether's allegiance from the one to the other is a token of his moral change of heart....

In his new vision, Mrs. Newsome's high idealism--for that is what it boils down to--takes on the color of the cold inhumanity which disturbs the reader in Euphemia de Mauves. Only, now the sense of the negative aspect is made more concrete--in those representatives of Woollett, Sarah and Jim and, after all, Chad.... Unlike *The Portrait of a Lady*, a story of disenchantment which invokes our sympathy for American idealism, it is a story of conversion.... Madame de Vionnet is part of an order 'governed by such considerations as put divorce out of the question.' What this contributes to the moral content of the novel is to free Strether for the appreciation of Madame de Vionnet's virtues, which to him prove themselves in the beauty which she salvages from the wreck of her life. It is significant that in quoting Strether's climactic speech in the preface James omitted the emphatically deterministic parts. In spite of his awareness of the limitations of human freedom, he had temperamentally not a trace of the Naturalist in him....

The real reasons for Strether's tacit rejection of Maria Gostrey's tacit proposal are part of the dramatic structure of the novel.... His unselfishness is more than ever important as a foil to Chad's egotism. Above all, however, Strether is more deeply moved by Madame de Vionnet than he quite realizes. To the end, she is to him 'the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition' it has been given him to meet. And it is this sense more than anything else that puts an end to Maria Gostrey's hopes. The contrast between these two women, too, is part of Strether's growing discrimination.... If the idealization of Madame de Vionnet is, in the light of his earlier handling of the American girl, rather striking, the reason is simply that here his emphasis falls on the possibilities of social discipline and experience rather than on the promise of innocence and spontaneity.... And what stands out in these late works is the idealization of different kinds of merit: of social beauty in Madame de Vionnet, of a high spiritual beauty in Milly Theale, and of their fusion in the marriage of Maggie Verver and the Roman Prince in *The Golden Bowl*."

Christof Wegelin
"The Lesson of Social Beauty"
The Image of Europe in Henry James
(SMU 1958) 86-105

"Invoking the predatory, the familiar image of the beast in the jungle, he reports that the subject of *The Ambassadors* 'sprang at [him], one day out of [his] notebook'... The imagery of violent and heroic physical adventure enters the prose of Henry James with the most telling purpose and effect. Especially conspicuous in the pages of the later novels, this extravagant imagery figures nowhere more crucially, perhaps, than in *The Ambassadors*, where in the dramatic moral development of Lambert Strether, James was to celebrate most fully and directly, the bravery of the human consciousness in action....

Such a man as Strether was might have 'an amount of experience out of any proportion to his adventures'.... It is in the service and support of this germinal thesis that James invokes in the pages of this novel so many heroic images of emergencies at sea, in the jungle, and on the field of battle. When the

principals of the novel are represented as 'ambassadors,' for example, James visualizes them as members not of a diplomatic, but of a military, mission. Mistrusting the Babylonian temptations of the French capitol, Strether decides to confront Chad immediately, 'to advance, to overwhelm, with a rush' and thus to 'anticipate--by a night-attack'... Called upon to defend his own unorthodox relations with Miss Gostrey, he will consider 'carrying the war into the enemy's country by showing surprise at the enemy's ignorance.' He is later confronted by a Mrs. Pocock who holds 'her tall parasol-stick upright and at arms' length, quite as if she had struck the place to plant her flag.' After 'the retreat of the Pockocks,' Maria Gostrey marvels at his being asked to take Mrs. Newsome 'at the point of the bayonet.' When he is not advancing and retreating on the field of battle, Strether is being tossed violently and unceremoniously about...

The streets of the novel at times run red with the blood of the wounded. Chad administers a dig to Strether than 'came nearer drawing blood' and in his fight with Mrs. Pocock is expected to use his elderly friend 'to the last drop of [his] blood.' Strether's tangled relations with people are later represented as bristling 'with fine points...that pricked and drew blood.' The highly civilized folk of this dangerous universe are not always distinguishable in fact from man-eating predators.... When the principals of the novel are not being rescued, bloodied, from the field of battle, they are being rescued, drenched, from the perilous flood. Strether is sure that Mrs. Pocock 'will take [Waymarsh] into her boat' [etc.]... The principals of the novel are elsewhere seen groping about in the dark passages of Cretan labyrinths or Gothic castles. Strether feels himself 'moving in a maze of mystic, closed allusions. Yet he kept hold of his thread'...

Bearing witness to a bizarre sense of humor, James's violent and heroic conceits produce comic effects ranging from the ironic to the farcical. The sheer extravagance of the figure renders character and action in terms of caricature as, for example, when Sally Pocock is caught gathering her skirts and her courage to leap from the runaway... Not even Strether himself is spared. Although his story has serious and even tragic undertones, the lineaments of the familiar and unfailingly funny story of the country bumpkin baffled by the ways of the big city are, perhaps, recognizable under the sophistication of the surface....

The function of the heroic imagery...is to underline the comic anti-heroism of character and action.... In the perilous world of Henry James, there are indeed lions in the lobbies, tigers in the parlor, death by drowning in the dining rooms, and in the very boulevards of Paris armies locked in mortal combat... Committed to developing the internal, the psychological, experience of character, he demonstrates that the territories of the mind are as fraught with perilous adventure as the more rugged territories traversed by Scott, Stevenson, and Kipling."

John Paterson

"The Language of 'Adventure' in Henry James"

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"It is as if [James's] interest in his material...had been too specialized, too much concentrated on certain limited kinds of possible development, and as if in the technical elaboration expressing this specialized interest he had lost his full sense of life and let his moral taste slip into abeyance.... *The Ambassadors* ...which he seems to have thought his greatest success, produces an effect of disproportionate 'doing'--of a technique the subtleties and elaborations of which are not sufficiently controlled by a feeling for value and significance in living. What, we ask, is this, symbolized by Paris, that Strether feels himself to have missed in his own life? Has James himself sufficiently inquired? Is it anything adequately realized? If we are to take the elaboration of the theme in the spirit in which we are meant to take it, haven't we to take the symbol too much at the glamorous face value it has for Strether? Isn't, that is, the energy of the 'doing' (and the energy demanded for the reading) disproportionate to the issues--to any issues that are concretely held and presented?...

The Ambassadors in particular has probably, since Mr. Percy Lubbock picked on it in *The Craft of Fiction* (Mr. E. M. Forster confirmed him in *Aspects of the Novel*), been the book most commonly attempted by those wishing to qualify in Henry James. This is to be deplored, since not only is *The Portrait of a Lady* much more likely, once started, to be read through and read with unfeigned enjoyment; it is much more worth reading."

F. R. Leavis

“One is quite at a loss to understand how this enlightened critic [F. R. Leavis] should so resolutely decline to read what is written in capitals on every page of this book. Does James need to tell us in so many words that Paris is, for Strether, as it has been for many generations of Americans, and Englishmen too--the Ville Lumiere, the place where ideas are everywhere in circulation, and subject to free and animated discussion--and that in this respect it is the absolute antithesis to Woollett, Mass., where Strether had been spending his starved life? Does he need to tell us--but this he does plainly--that it is physically and socially a seat of great amenity, where one can exercise and communicate with ‘an ideal civilized sensibility; a humanity capable of the finest shades of inflection and implication,’ where ‘a nuance may engage a whole complex moral economy and the perceptive response be the index of a major valuation or choice’?”

Is it not clear that what Paris gives to Strether, under the helpful direction of Maria Gostrey, is a ‘glimpse of a possible “civilization” in which the manners belonging to a ripe social intercourse shall be the index of a moral refinement’--well, if not ‘of the best American kind’ as conceived in Woollett, at least of the kind that was implicit in every turn of James’s father’s ethical philosophy? For the elder James was determined to cultivate the spirit and substance of the moral life, and was highly scornful of the ‘flagrant moralism’ which he found so often taking the place of true ethical judgment. And so Strether.

He went to Paris to fetch back Chad Newsome, so that the young man might go into the business and further augment the family fortune; and he was expected to pry him loose from some low sexual involvement. It took some time to determine just what this involvement was, but it soon became evident that it was not so low but what it had made a thoroughly ‘civilized’ man of Chad. To Strether it was clear that Chad owed something to a relationship so serious and of such long standing, which involved so genuine and deep a love on the part of the woman, and in the end he is greatly disappointed with Chad for his willingness to ditch his love so irresponsibly, so that he can return to Woollett and go into the advertising end of the business.

In the course of the series of occasions necessary to bring about these successive changes of view in regard to Chad, Strether has had an opportunity to revise his opinion of Mrs. Newsome and to take a good dose of the Woollett tone in the persons of the Pococks, sent over to keep him in line. None of this is too subtle for any interested reader to take in, but it does take a good deal of ‘doing.’ For it involves nothing less than the formal opposition of a commercial, Unitarian and narrowly puritan way of living and thinking to that ‘possible “civilization” in which the manners, etc., shall be the index, etc.’ That is, for Strether it involves his instinct to judge moral situations from the inside by their quality and substance rather than by the labels attached to them by conventional opinion from the outside.

Perhaps the unsureness of James’s moral touch is betrayed, for Mr. Leavis, by the fact that, when Strether is thoroughly persuaded of the rightness of Chad’s attachment to Mme. de Vionnet, and of the obligation to loyalty which it entails for Chad, he is scarcely perturbed by his accidental discovery that their relation is a ‘guilty’ one. But that can hardly be what troubles a critic like Mr. Leavis, who prefers genuine though ‘guilty’ love relationships to sentimental platonic ones such as those involving Adam Verver and his daughter in *The Golden Bowl*--a critic who can say, of the characters in that novel, ‘if our sympathies are anywhere, they are with Charlotte and (a little) the Prince, who represent what, against the general moral background of the book, can only strike us as a decent passion; in a stale, sickly and oppressive atmosphere they represent life.’

Or perhaps the unsureness of touch is shown in the several changes of attitude undergone by Strether between the first page and the last. It is here that we may have come to the heart of the matter. For the great peculiarity of James’s later narratives is that we do not arrive at his final valuations without going through a long course of ‘visions and revisions.’ And while it may seem to some of us that this is the very way that, in actual life, we do win through to our valuations, and that indeed such is the true essence of a live and working ethical experience, it may appear to others to be the sign of a radical unsureness of touch in author and character, and a fertile source of obscurity and obfuscation for the reader.”

Joseph Warren Beach
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The Method of Henry James (1954) xlviili-li

“It is characteristic of Leavis that he goes straight to the heart of the matter. Certainly these questions are the ones we should ask ourselves. The only adequate answers are contained in the novel itself--the work of art in which James unearths his buried bone. But some readers may be deterred from looking there by Leavis’ implication that he will find nothing worth while. In case that should happen I will attempt to counterattack.

During the seven years that intervened between his hearing the anecdote and his writing *The Ambassadors* James was asking himself what it was ‘symbolized by Paris’ that Strether felt himself to have missed. The answer is in the whole series of impressions we are made to share with him through the novel. Little more can be said, in other terms than James’s own, except that he had missed those spontaneous joys that come from the contemplation of beauty, the culture of the mind and uncalculating love for a fellow-creature. It does not seem to James--and it does not seem to a reader who responds to his novel--that Paris has, by the end, a ‘glamorous face value’ for Strether. It had something like that at the beginning of the book. But the Paris he renounces for himself contains cruelty, greed, and suffering as well as generosity, courage, and joy. The issues ‘concretely held and presented’ are not, to my mind, disproportionate to the labor of writing or of reading because they are ever-relevant issues between true and false human values. Finally I should like to add that the ‘energy demanded for reading’ is rewarded at every turn, not only because we share with James the discovery of important truths; but because we are continuously spell-bound by his story and amused by his irony, his wit, and his charm in presenting what he sees.”

Joan Bennett
Chicago Review 9.4 (Winter 1956) 26

“But is it merely the ‘glamorous face value’ of Paris? Mr. Leavis is under the impression that the traditional symbol of the French capitol as a glittering Babylon is the whole of Strether’s vision. This is decidedly not the case. It is seeing that is the subject of the novel, perception at the pitch of awareness; and this could have been treated in any scene, as James remarked in his notebooks when he debated the merits of Paris as against England or Italy. As Joan Bennett has pointed out, we are made to share a ‘whole series of impressions’ with Strether throughout the novel--his feelings in the green countryside, his sympathy with Madame de Vionnet, his grasp of the ideal and the ugly, his balancing of the parochial and the cosmopolitan, his appraisal of an entire code of values as between Woollett and Paris, and his refusal to dance to the trite little tune of Sarah Pocock. All this is a great deal more than the ‘face value’ of the French capital. ‘Awareness’ is made by James the very essence of life itself.

Miss Bennett leaves partly unanswered the other aspect of Mr. Leavis’s statement: ‘the energy demanded for the reading.’ If we are to start measuring such energies, we would find ourselves indeed in an uncritical muscle-flexing world. Mr. Edmund Wilson, with his fine energy, was able to read *Finnegans Wake* long before most of its present-day readers could summon the energy to read a few pages; and Mr. Thornton Wilder has so much energy that he continues to read it daily. Personal ‘energy’ cannot, it seems to me, be invoked in this way; it is, critically speaking, irrelevant. There are readers for whom certain books will always remained closed; and others for whom the same books cannot be opened too often. James wrote *The Ambassadors* for the attentive reader, and a reader capable of seeing with him--and accepting his painter-sense, his brush-work, his devotion to picture and to scene and above all his need to render this in a highly colored and elaborate style, so as to capture the nuances of his perceptions. The reader who is able to give him ‘attention of perusal,’ will discover soon enough the particular rewards of this book. When he meets James on the ground proper to the novelist, and walks with him over it, he will recognize, after fifty years, that *The Ambassadors* possesses a singular perfection--the novel converted from mere storytelling to work of art.”

Leon Edel, ed.
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The Ambassadors (Riverside 1960)

Michael Hollister (2015)