

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF HENRY JAMES

(1843-1916)

"There is no doubt that James's style is often too puffed up with its secrets. Despite its air of immense significance, the dark, unfathomed caves of his ocean contain sometimes only the same sort of gravel you could have picked up on the shore. I have that from deep sea thinkers who have been down him... If the obscurity of the language were due to the idea itself, and if while he tugs at an obstinate thought you could be sure it was worth the trouble, there would be no fault to find, but to him one thing seems as good as another when he is mousing around in a mind. It is a form of self-indulgence. He is as pleased with the motives that lead nowhere as with anything else. It is his even emphasis that most misleads. He writes a staccato chronicle of things both great and small, like a constitutional history half made up of the measures that never passed. And in one respect he does not play fairly. He makes his characters read each other's minds from clues that he keeps to himself."

Frank Moore Colby
"In Darkest James" (1904)

Brother William: "You know how opposed your whole 'third manner' of execution is to the literary ideals which animate my crude...breast, mine being to say a little thing in one sentence as straight and explicit as it can be made, and then to drop it forever; yours being to avoid naming it straight, but by dint of breathing and sighing all round and round it, to arouse in the reader who may have had a similar perception already...wholly out of impalpable materials, air, and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused by mirrors upon empty space....But it's the rummest method for one to employ systematically as you do nowadays; and you employ it at your peril. In this crowded and hurried reading age, pages that require such close attention remain unread and neglected. You can't skip a word if you are to get the effect, and 19 out of 20 worthy readers grow intolerant. The method seems perverse: 'Say it out, for God's sake,' they cry, 'and have done with it.' And so I say now, give us *one* thing in your older directer manner, just to show that, in spite of your paradoxical success in this unheard of method, you can still write according to accepted canons....For gleams and innuendoes and felicitous verbal insinuations you are unapproachable, but the core of literature is solid. Give it to us *once* again! The bare perfume of things will not support existence, and the effect of solidity you reach is but perfume and simulacrum."

William James
"The Third Manner"
Letter to Henry James (4 May 1907)

"The long sentences piling themselves up in elaborate phrase after phrase, the lightning incision, the pauses, the slightly shaking admonitory gesture with its 'wu-w-wait a little, wait a little, something will come'...I am tired of hearing pettiness talked about Henry James's style. The subject has been discussed enough in all conscience, along with the minor James. What I have not heard is any word of the major James, of the hater of tyranny; book after book against oppression."

Ezra Pound
"A Brief Note"
The Little Review (August 1918) 6-9

Parody: "It was with the sense of a, for him, very memorable something that he peered now into the immediate future, and tried, not without compunction, to take that period up where he had, prospectively, left it. But just where the deuce *had* he left it? The consciousness of dubiety was, for our friend, not, this morning, quite yet clean-cut enough to outline the figures on what she had called his 'horizon,' between which and himself the twilight was indeed of a quality somewhat intimidating."

Max Beerbohm
"The Mote in the Middle Distance"

Parody: "She luminously wavered, and I tentatively inferred that she would soon perfectly reconsider her not altogether unobvious course. Furiously, though with a tender, ebbing similitude, across her mental consciousness stole a re-culmination of all the truths she had ever known concerning, or even remotely relating to, the not-easily fathomed qualities of paste and ink. So she stood, focused in an intensity of soul-quivers, and I, all unrelenting, waited, though of a dim uncertainty whether, after all, it might not be only a dubiant problem."

Carolyn Wells
"The Poets at a House Party"

"All art too acutely self-centered comes to this sort of thing....over-perception begins....His people nose out suspicions, hint by hint, link by link. Have you ever known living human beings to do that? The thing his novel is *about* is always there. It is like a church lit, but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on the altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string....

Having first made sure that he has scarcely anything left to express, he then sets to work to express it, with an industry, a wealth of intellectual stuff that dwarfs Newton....He brings up every device of language to state and define. Bare verbs he rarely tolerates. He splits his infinitives and fills them up with adverbial stuffing. He presses the passing colloquialism into his service. His vast paragraphs sweat and struggle; they could not sweat and elbow and struggle more if God Himself was the processional meaning to which they sought to come. And all for tales of nothingness....It is leviathan retrieving pebbles. It is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea which has got into a corner of its den. Most things, it insists, are beyond it, but it can, at any rate, modestly, and with an artistic singleness of mind, pick up that pea."

H. G. Wells
"A magnificent but painful hippopotamus"

from "The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication"

Ian Watt

THE PARAGRAPH

"Strether's first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted. A telegram from him bespeaking a room 'only if not noisy', reply paid, was produced for the inquirer at the office, so that the understanding they should meet at Chester rather than at Liverpool remained to that extent sound. The same secret principle, however, that had prompted Strether not absolutely to desire Waymarsh's presence at the dock, that had led him thus to postpone for a few hours his enjoyment of it, now operated to make him feel he could still wait without disappointment. They would dine together at the worst, and, with all respect to dear old Waymarsh--if not even, for that matter, to himself--there was little fear that in the sequel they shouldn't see enough of each other. The principle I have just mentioned as operating had been, with the most newly embarked of the two men, wholly instinctive--the fruit of a sharp sense that, delightful as it would be to find himself looking, after so much separation, into his comrade's face, his business would be a trifle bungled should he simply arrange for this countenance to present itself to the nearing steamer as the first "note" of Europe. Mixed with everything was the apprehension, already, on Strether's part, that it would, at best, throughout, prove the note of Europe in quite a sufficient degree."

ANALYSIS

"It seems a fairly ordinary sort of prose, but for its faint air of elaborate portent...There's certainly nothing particularly striking in the diction or syntax; none of the immediate drama or rich description that we often get at the beginning of novels; and certainly none of the sensuous concreteness that, until recently, was regarded as a chief criterion of good prose in our long post-imagistic phase: if anything, the passage is conspicuously un-sensuous and un-concrete, a little dull perhaps, and certainly not easy reading."

The difficulty isn't one of particularly long or complicated sentences: actually they're of fairly usual length: I make it an average of 41 words; a little, but not very much, longer than James's average of 35.... The main cause of difficulty seems rather to come from what may be called the delayed specification of referents: 'Strether' and 'the hotel' and 'his friend' are mentioned before we are told who or where they are. But this difficulty is so intimately connected with James's general narrative technique that it may be better to begin with purely verbal idiosyncrasies, which are more easily isolated. The most distinctive ones in the passage seem to be these: a preference for non-transitive verbs; many abstract nouns; much use of 'that'; a certain amount of elegant variation to avoid piling up personal pronouns and adjectives such as 'he,' 'his' and 'him'; and the presence of a great many negatives and near-negatives.

By the preference for non-transitive verbs I mean three related habits: a great reliance on copulatives—'Strether's first question was about his friend'; '*was* apparently not to arrive': a frequent use of the passive voice—'*was* not wholly *disconcerted*'; 'a telegram...*was produced*'; 'his business *would be a trifle bungled*': and the employment of many intransitive verbs—'the understanding...remained...sound'; 'the...principle...operated to'. My count of all the verbs in the indicative would give a total of 14 passive, copulative or intransitive uses as opposed to only 6 transitive ones: and there are in addition frequent infinitive, participial, or gerundial uses of transitive verbs, in all of which the active nature of the subject-verb-and-object sequence is considerably abated—'on his learning'; 'bespeaking a room'; 'not absolutely to desire'; 'led him thus to postpone'.

This relative infrequency of transitive verbal usages in the passage is associated with the even more pronounced tendency towards using abstract nouns as subjects of main or subordinate clauses: 'question'; 'understanding'; 'the same secret principle'; 'the principle'; 'his business'. If one takes only the main clauses, there are four such abstract nouns as subjects, while only three main clauses have concrete and particular subjects ('he', or 'they'). I detail these features only to establish that in this passage, at least, there is a clear quantitative basis for the common enough view that James's late prose style is characteristically abstract: more explicitly, that the main grammatical subjects are very often nouns for mental ideas, 'question', 'principle', etc.; and that the verbs—because they are mainly used either non-transitively, or in infinitive, participial and gerundial forms,—tend to express states of being rather than particular finite actions affecting objects....

What need exploring...are the particular literary imperatives which impose on his style so many of the verbal and syntactical qualities of abstract and general discourse; of expository rather than narrative prose. ...Consider the first sentence. The obvious narrative way of making things particular and concrete would presumably be 'When Strether reached the hotel, he first asked "Has Waymarsh arrive yet?"' Why does James say it the way he does? One effect is surely that, instead of a sheer stated event, we get a very special view of it; the mere fact that actuality has been digested into reported speech—the question 'was about his friend'—involves a narrator to do the job, to interpret the action, and also a presumed audience that he does it for: and by implication, the heat of the action itself must have cooled off somewhat for the transition and analysis of the events into this form of statement to have had time to occur. Lastly, making the subject of the sentence 'question' rather than 'he', has the effect of subordinating the particular actor, and therefore the particular act, to a much more general perspective: mental rather than physical, and subjective rather than objective...

James disliked the 'mere platitude of statement' involved in first-person narrative; partly, presumably, because it would merge Strether's consciousness into the narrative, and not isolate it for the reader's inspection. For such isolation, a more expository method is needed: no confusion of subject and object, as in first-person narration, but a narrator forcing the reader to pay attention to James's primary objective—Strether's mental and subjective state.

The 'multidimensional' quality of the narrative, with its continual implication of a community of three minds—Strether's, James's, and the reader's—isn't signaled very obviously until the fourth sentence...But it's already been established tacitly in every detail of diction and structure, and it remains pervasive. One reason for the special demand James's fictional prose makes on our attention is surely that there are always at least three levels of development—all of them subjective: the characters' awareness of events; the narrator's seeing of them; and our own trailing perception of the relation between the two.

The primary location of the narrative in a mental rather than a physical continuum gives the narrative a great freedom from the restrictions of particular time and place....We don't have any pressing sense of time and place: we feel ourselves to be spectators, rather specifically, of Strether's thought processes, which easily and imperceptibly range forwards and backwards both in time and space. Sentence three, for example, begins in the past, at the Liverpool dock; sentence four looks forward to the reunion later that day, and to its many sequels: such transitions of time and place are much easier to effect when the main subjects of the sentences are abstract: a 'principle' exists independently of its context....

Reported rather than direct speech also increases the pressure towards elegant variation: the use, for example, in sentence 1 of 'his friend', where in direct speech it would be 'Mr. Waymarsh' (and the reply—'He hasn't come yet'). In the second sentence—'a telegram...was produced for the inquirer'—'inquirer' is needed because 'him' has already been used for Waymarsh just above; of course, 'the inquirer' is logical enough after the subject of the first sentence has been an abstract noun—'question'; and the epithet also gives James an opportunity for underlining the ironic distance and detachment with which we are invited to view his dedicated 'inquirer', Strether. Later, when Strether is 'the most newly disembarked of the two men', we see how both elegant variation and the grammatical subordination of physical events are related to the general Jamesian tendency to present characters and actions on a plane of abstract categorization; the mere statement, 'Mr. Waymarsh had already been in England for [so many] months', would itself go far to destroy the primarily mental continuum in which the paragraph as a whole exists....

[The] abundance of negatives has no doubt several functions: it enacts Strether's tendency to hesitation and qualification; it puts the reader into the right judicial frame of mind; and it has the further effect of subordinating concrete events to their mental reflection....There are no negatives in Nature but only in human consciousness....

John Henry Raleigh's illuminating study "Henry James: The Poetics of Empiricism" (*PMLA*, LXVI [1951]: 107-123), which establishes connections between Lockean epistemology and James's extreme, almost anarchic, individualism...leads towards...the concern with 'point of view'...a crucial problem in the history and criticism of fiction under the influence of the skeptical relativism of the late nineteenth-century. In James's case, the problem is fairly complicated. He may be classed as an 'Impressionist', concerned, that is, to show not so much the events themselves, but the impressions which they make on the characters. But James's continual need to generalize and place and order, combined with his absolute demand for a point of view that would be plastic enough to allow him freedom for the formal 'architectonics' of the novelist's craft, eventually involved him in a very idiosyncratic kind of multiple Impressionism: idiosyncratic because the dual presence of Strether's consciousness and of that of the narrator, who translates what he sees there into more general terms, makes the narrative point of view both intensely individual and yet ultimately social....

The abstractness and indirection of James's style are essentially the result of this characteristic multiplicity of his vision. There is, for example, the story reported by Edith Wharton that after his first stroke James told Lady Prothero that 'in the very act of falling...he heard in the room a voice which was distinctly, it seemed, not his own, saying: "So here it is at last, the distinguished thing".' James, apparently, could not but see even his own most fateful personal experience, except as evoked by some other observer's voice in terms of the long historical and literary tradition of death....typical of the Alexandrian style, where there is a marked disparity between the rich inheritance of the means of literary expression, and the meaner creative world which it is used to express; but the defense of the Jamesian habit of mind must surely be that what the human vision shares with that of animals is presumably the perception of concrete images, not the power to conceive universals: such was Aristotle's notion of man's distinguishing capacity. The universals in the present context are presumably the awareness that behind every petty individual circumstance there ramifies an endless network of general moral, social and historical relations. Henry James's style can therefore be seen as a supremely civilized effort to relate every event and every moment of life to the full complexity of its circumambient conditions.

Obviously James's multiple awareness can go too far; and in the later novels it often poses the special problem that we do not quite know whether the awareness implied in a given passage is the narrator's or that of his character. Most simply, a pronoun referring to the subject of a preceding clause is always liable

to give trouble if one hasn't been very much aware of what the grammatical subject of that preceding clause was; in the last sentence of the paragraph, for example, 'the apprehension, already, on Strether's part, that...it would, at best,...prove the "note" of Europe,' 'it' refers to Waymarsh's countenance: but this isn't at first obvious; which is no doubt why, in his revision of the periodical version for the English edition James replaced 'it' by 'he'--simpler, grammatically, but losing some of the ironic visual precision of the original. More seriously, because the narrator's consciousness and Strether's are both present, we often don't know whose mental operations and evaluative judgments are involved in particular cases. We pass, for instance, from the objective analysis of sentence 3 where the analytic terminology of 'the same secret principle' must be the responsibility of the narrator, to what must be a verbatim quotation of Strether's mind in sentence 4: 'with all respect to dear old Waymarsh' is obviously Strether's licensed familiarity.

But although the various difficulties of tense, voice, and reference require a vigilance of attention in the reader which some have found too much to give, they are not in themselves very considerable: and what perhaps is much more in need of attention is how the difficulties arising from the multiplicity of points of view don't by any means prevent James from ordering all the elements of his narrative style into an amazingly precise means of expression...

The Ambassadors is written with considerable sobriety and has, for example, little of the vivid and direct style of the early part of *The Wings of the Dove*, or of the happy symbolic complexities of *The Golden Bowl*. Still, the passage is fairly typical of the later James...

The mockingly fateful emphasis on 'throughout' tells us, if nothing had before, that James's tone is in the last analysis ironic, comic, or better, as I shall try to suggest, humorous...The comic artist subordinates the presentation of life as experience, where the relationship between ourselves and the characters experiencing it is a primary one, to the presentation of life as spectacle, where the primary relation is between himself and us as onlookers...The application of abstract diction to particular persons always tends towards irony, because it imposes a dual way of looking at them: Few of us can survive being presented as general representatives of humanity.

The paragraph, of course, is based on one of the classic contradictions in psychological comedy—Strether's reluctance to admit to himself that he has very mixed feelings about his friend: and James develops this with the narrative equivalent of *commedia dell'arte* technique: virtuoso feats of ironic balance, comic exaggeration, and deceptive hesitation conduct us on a complicated progress towards the foreordained illumination...Waymarsh's telegram bespeaking a room 'only if not noisy' is a laconic suggestion of that inarticulate worthy's habitually gloomy expectations--from his past experiences of the indignities of European hotel noise we adumbrate the notion that the cost of their friendly *rencontre* may be his sleeping in the street...

In the second group of sentences we are getting into Strether's mind, and we have been prepared to relish the irony of its ambivalences. The negated hyperbole of 'not absolutely to desire', turns out to mean postpone; and, of course, a voluntarily postponed 'enjoyment' itself denotes a very modified rapture...Comically loyal to what he would like to feel, therefore, we have him putting in the consoling reflection that 'they would dine together at the worst'; and the ambiguity of 'at the worst' is followed by the equally dubious thought: 'there was little fear that in the sequel they shouldn't see enough of each other'. That they should, in fact, see too much of each other; but social decorum and Strether's own loyalties demand that the outrage of the open statement be veiled in the obscurity of formal negation.

By the time we arrive at the climactic pair of sentences, we have been told enough for more ambitious effects to be possible. The twice-mentioned 'secret principle', it appears, is actually wholly 'instinctive' (line 17); but in other ways Strether is almost ludicrously self-conscious. The qualified hyperbole of 'his business would be a trifle bungled', underlined as it is by the alliteration, prepares us for a half-realized image which amusingly defines Strether's sense of his role: He sees himself, it appears, as the stage-manager of an enterprise in which his solemn obligations as an implicated friend are counterbalanced by his equally ceremonious sense that due decorums must also be attended to when he comes face to face with another friend of long ago--no less a person than Europe. It is, of course, silly of him, as James makes him acknowledge in the characteristic italicizing of 'the "note" of Europe'; but still, he does have a comically

ponderous sense of protocol which leads him to feel that 'his business would be a trifle bungled' should he simply arrange for this countenance to present itself to the nearing steamer as the first 'note' of Europe. The steamer, one imagines, would not have turned hard astern at the proximity of Waymarsh's sacred rage; but Strether's fitness for ambassadorial functions is defined by his thinking in terms of 'arranging' for a certain countenance at the docks to give just the right symbolic greeting.

Strether's notion of what Europe demands also shows us the force of his aesthetic sense....Waymarsh is indeed suited to the role of being the sourly acid test of the siren songs of Europe 'in quite a sufficient degree', as Strether puts it with solemn but arch understatement. The basic development structure of the passage, then, is one of progressive and yet artfully delayed clarification; and this pattern is also typical of James's general novelistic method. The reasons for this are suggested in the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, where James deals with the problem of maintaining a balance between the intelligence a character must have to be interesting, and the bewilderment which is nevertheless an essential condition of the novel's having surprise, development, and tension: 'It seems probable that if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us.'

In the first paragraph of *The Ambassadors* James apprises us both of his hero's supreme qualities and of his associated limitations. Strether's delicate critical intelligence is often blinkered by a highly vulnerable mixture of moral generosity towards others combined with an obsessive sense of personal inadequacy; we see the tension in relation to Waymarsh, as later we are to see it in relation to all his other friends; and we understand, long before Strether, how deeply it bewilders him; most poignantly about the true nature of Chad, Madame de Vionnet--and himself.

This counterpoint of intelligence and bewilderment is, of course, another reason for the split narrative point of view... We and the narrator are inside Strether's mind, and yet we are also outside it, knowing more about Strether than he knows about himself. This is the classic posture of irony. Yet I think that to insist too exclusively on the ironic function of James's narrative point of view would be mistaken. Irony has lately been enshrined as the supreme deity in the critical pantheon: but, I wonder, is there really anything so wonderful about being distant and objective? Who wants to see life only or mainly in intellectual terms? In art as in life we no doubt can have need of intellectual distance as well as of emotional commitment; but the uninvolvement of the artist doesn't go very far without the total involvement of the person; or, at least, without a deeper human involvement than irony customarily establishes. One could, I suppose, call the aesthetically perfect balance between distance and involvement, open or positive irony: but I'm not sure that humour isn't a better word, especially when the final balance is tipped in favor of involvement, of ultimate commitment to the characters...

It seems to me that James's attitude to Strether is better described as humorous than ironical; we must learn like Maria Gostry to see him 'at last all comically, all tragically'. James's later novels are most intellectual; but they are also, surely, his most compassionate: and in this particular paragraph Strether's dilemma is developed in such a way that we feel for him even more than we smile at him. This balance of intention, I think, probably explains why James keeps his irony so quiet in tone: we must be aware of Strether's 'secret' ambivalence towards Waymarsh, but not to the point that his unawareness of it would verge on fatuity...That James's final attitude is humorous rather than ironic is further suggested by the likeness of the basic structural technique of the paragraph to that of the funny story--the incremental involvement in an endemic human perplexity which can only be resolved by laughter's final acceptance of contradiction and absurdity...We find it, increasingly, a touching example of how, despite all their inevitable incongruities and shortcomings, human ties remain only, but still, human....

James has carefully avoided giving up the usual retrospective beginning, that pile of details which he scornfully termed a 'mere seated mass of information'. All the details are scrupulously presented as reflections from the novel's essential centre--the narrator's patterning of the ideas going forwards and backwards in Strether's mind. Of course, this initially makes the novel more difficult, because what we probably think of as primary--event and its setting--is subordinated to what James thinks is the mental drama of the hero's consciousness, which, of course, is not told but shown: scenically dramatized. At the same time, by selecting thoughts and events which are representative of the book as a whole, and narrating them with an abstractness which suggests their larger import, James introduces the most general themes of

the novel....In Dickens, characteristically, we get a loud note that sets the tone, rather than a polyphonic series of chords that contain all the later melodic developments, as in James....For openings that suggest something of James's ambitious attempt to achieve a prologue that is a synchronic introduction of all the main aspects of the narrative, I think that Conrad is his closest rival....

The notorious idiosyncrasies of Jamesian prose are directly related to the imperatives which led him to develop a narrative texture as richly complicated and as highly organized as that of poetry....Translation could hardly do justice to a paragraph in which so many levels of meaning and implication are kept in continuous operation; in which the usual introductory exposition of time, place, character, and previous action, are rendered through an immediate immersion in the processes of the hero's mind as he's involved in perplexities which are characteristic of the novel as a whole and which are articulated in a mode of comic development which is essentially that, not only of the following chapter, but of the total structure....contrary to some notions, the demonstration is, as James claimed, made with 'a splendid particular economy'."

Ian Watt

"The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication"
Essays in Criticism X (July 1960) 250-74

"Henry James, even while he rejected 'Papa's ideas,' was unconsciously subjected to his father's prose style and the influence of a prose style can linger, like incense on the air, long after its echoes have died away....The elder Henry James' impatience and eccentricity are reflected in his prose style. His earlier writings were, for the most part, negative criticisms of religious orthodoxy; his later writings were concerned with the tenets of 'The New Church,' of which, as somebody remarked, he was the only member....A style whose chief characteristic is repetitiousness is not fitted for the fine discriminations which Henry James the elder spent his life trying to make....His thoughts press so hard one on the other, and he succumbs so often (within a single paragraph) to the temptations to express himself paradoxically if not contrarily, that he seldom succeeds in writing a decent sentence....

The prose style of Henry James the novelist grew more complicated the longer he lived. Various reasons are given for this. Those who are inclined to take a superficial view of his work say that it was because he dictated his later novels. His more discerning admirers hold that the complexity of his later style is the result of the fact that as he grew in stature he had more to say and therefore needed a longer sentence to say it in. I think that there is a good deal of truth in this view. The novelist's early style is, as I have said, distinguished by lucidity and grace and he deals more than competently with his subject matter. If his literary career had ended with the publication of *Daisy Miller* or even *The Bostonians* there would have been ready for him a safe and comfortable niche in our Hall of Fame.

His was the harder and more stirring fate of the author whose works are not really read in his lifetime for the reason that his readers are not yet born. (James, during his lifetime, did not have a single discerning reader as his notebooks testify. 'Oh, if there only *were* a reader!' he once exclaimed.) I suspect that when he put his early triumphs behind him and began his subterranean explorations into the abysses that underlie all human conduct he was deeply influenced by his father's example of saintliness and lifelong dedication to an ideal so high that it seemed almost impossible of realization, and, finding himself committed to the same high adventure, unconsciously echoed the cadences which recorded his father's agonized and seemingly unsuccessful search for the eternal verities.

To a sensitive ear James' prose--in his later novels--is unmodulated and lacking in one of the foremost requirements of a good style: balance....The simple is seldom posed against the complicated, the devious against the direct. Complication, rather, follows complication, one indirection often seems to beget another, until we are sometimes in danger of losing the point of what James has to say through his earnest effort to keep saying more and more....James, for the most part, writes only one kind of sentence. It is rather long and bristles with subordinate clauses, with qualifications; he hardly gets one thing said before he starts saying another. There is something amateurish about the general run of James' sentences. They are like a young author's first novel...James often seems to be attacking each sentence as if it were to be the last he would ever write. Everything that comes into his mind on this particular subject at that moment is packed into one sentence, which often breaks in two under the weight imposed on it; the reader's attention is likely

to stray midway of the sentence whereas he might have held on to the end if the author had demanded less of him.

Compare [this] with Joyce's *Dubliners* or his *Portrait of the Artist*. Joyce has at his command a variety of sentences. He uses often a short, declarative sentence, unqualified by subordinate clauses; a longer sentence which often appears in the middle of the paragraph as a sort of connective, which may or may not have subordinate clauses; and, finally, the long sonorous sentence which is the crowning glory of his prose style....Each of Joyce's sentences is modulated. So are his paragraphs. The modulation--it is actually a rhythm--carries on from one paragraph to another. But rhythm, if it is to please the ear, must have variations--in paragraphing as well as in the individual sentence. If every paragraph on a page has the same rhythm the effect is monotonous. In Joyce a short, so to speak staccato, paragraph is often followed by a paragraph which is not only longer but has a looser rhythm....

There is in good writing 'a visual actuality. It exactly reproduces what we should metaphorically call the contour of our thought.' James' paragraphs *look* ugly on the page. Each paragraph, when it is not broken by conversation, is a solid block whose size and shape seem to have been determined not by any consideration of pleasing or luring the reader, but by the amount of endurance the author was able to muster. His paragraphs end only when he comes, for the moment, to the end of his endurance. The fact of the matter is that James in early youth was not subjected to any of the disciplines and was exposed to but few of the models which ordinarily play an important part in the formation of a good prose style."

Caroline Gordon
"Tone, Style, and Controlling Metaphor"
How to Read a Novel
(Viking 1964) 149, 151-57

TASTES DIFFER

The small number of critics and readers who love everything he wrote consider Henry James the greatest American novelist. His critical status goes up and down with succeeding generations. Most readers like some of his work but not all. How much they like is a matter of taste. One critic, Philip Guedella, has said, "There are three periods of his career--James I, James II, and James the Pretender." His brother William said, "There isn't any third manner....Poor Harry had simply changed his stenographer and the new one records all his hesitations and ellipses."

Michael Hollister (2018)