Henry James's *The Ambassadors*: "The Nuance of the Novel"

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The word "nuance" means a slight or delicate variation in expression, feeling, opinion, or meaning. *The Ambassadors* by Henry James is a novel which contains an extraordinary range of subtle gradation in the use of language which can in turn lead the reader to some understanding of the "nuances of personality" in each of the characters. Thus this paper will attempt a preliminary explication of language as a revelation of personality in *The Ambassadors.*

For the purposes of this paper the first book (chapters one, two, and three) will be discussed. The reason for such a concentration of effort is not difficult to understand in light of our experience with Henry James. The author is himself a 'concentrate' or as critics have previously stated, his writing is comparable to that of a piece of complex and tightly woven fabric. The closer one looks at the material, the more threads and shades of colour, what is here called nuance, one is likely to see. Therefore the discussion of even one book becomes a monumental undertaking.

Another reason, aside from the difficulty of the prose structure, for using the first book as a basis for this paper is that the arrangement of the three chapters provides the organization for the rest of the entire novel. The first chapter is about the meeting between Strether and Maria Gostrey. The second records the encounter between Strether and Waymarsh, while the third describes how these two forces (Gostrey-Waymarsh) work upon Strether. In miniature we have a setting; a range of ideas, sensibilities, and language that will play on Strether as he undertakes his mission as ambassador.

The book begins with Strether, and with his question. He is, of course, inquiring after the location of his friend, but the connotations of the word "question" must linger in the reader's mind. "Question" indicates an uncertainty, an attempt to engender a response, a search for definition, if you will. By beginning the novel in this way, and by further allowing the reader to get the feeling that for some reason, "some secret principle" Strether is happy to be by himself upon his arrival in Europe, the reader is aware that something is in progress and things are not quite as ordinary as the arrival of an American in Europe.

The first sentence of the next paragraph reveals, what will come to be for Strether, and interesting paradox. He feels conscious of "personal freedom..." the likes of "he hadn't known for years." Further, Strether is described as having "a deep taste of change and of having above all for the moment nobody and nothing to consider." Both of

these feelings will become problematic. The facts, which we will soon know, are that Strether's ideas about the existence of "personal freedom" contradict the reason for his very trip to Europe. He has not only been sent to persuade his future wife's eldest son to give up *his* freedom and return to Woollett, but also he is performing this task under a sense of compulsion, of duty to a woman (Mrs. Newsome) and a system (the manufacturing business) the validity of both he has begun to seriously question.

Nonetheless Strether begins his mission by intending to spend the afternoon alone in order to experience "the immediate and the sensible." And what could be more appropriate than his meeting with the immediate and sensible Maria Gostrey? She knows Mr. Waymarsh, having met him before through mutual acquaintances. But obviously Maria wishes to know Strether, now. James uses a most delightful metaphor in retelling their first conversation. Each remark is laid or removed from the "table of conversation" ready for consumption. Maria and Strether have an instant affinity for one another, "with an absence of preliminaries." This kind of instantaneous intimacy requires explanation, which James will proceed to do on his own, but a word or so about why this meeting will prove so important is in order.

Maria invites Strether to walk in the garden of the hotel with her and he, who had previously enjoyed his solitude and purposely avoided making acquaintances now readily accepts. The reason is that he feels comfortable accepting her "protection." She carries with her an air of proprietorship about the hotel, that will extend to London and Paris, and the ways of all of Europe. Strether says he feels received as a "guest" and Maria in her manner acts as "hostess."

James, after exposing so much of his character's personalities, must proceed to give us some idea of what they look like. There is nothing particularily remarkable in Strether's physical appearance, except perhaps he reminds one of Emerson with a moustache. Strether notices how perfectly appropriate Maria looks standing in the garden, with her air of propriety and suitability, but that is as far as he goes. Strether is "not free to analyse" further about what Maria is. This is an interesting hold that Strether puts on his emotions; a very American way of minding one's own business, as opposed to the more natural, more European form of expression and more importantly what is called intuition that both Maria and Madame de Vionnet will employ. But Strether is not without possibilities, or as we have said before, questions. He does describe his feelings as he meets Maria as those of having a "sense of the past" and he does conclude that Maria is, in the end, in possession of a quality of personality or "civilization" which looms large in what Europe is and is even still a matter for debate in reference to America.

Yet Strether and Maria do have links, and this is what makes her role so superb. She is a "familiar compatriot" promising to help unravel the mystery which in an undefined sense is perplexing Strether's soul. The common qualities that they share; brother and sister in appearance, provides a clear foreshadowing of what the nature of the relationship

will be, at least in James's mind. Maria may fall in love with Strether, and he may rely on her for the strong reference point she can provide in the story's confusion but ultimately brother and sister they appear to be and brother and sister they must remain.

Their relationship naturally will not turn out to be as matter of fact as that. Strether appreciates the way she adjusts her gloves to fit her fingers, and the beauty of the action complements her superior knowledge of the world and of him, "She knew even intimate things about him that he hadn't told her and perhaps never would." Strether regards her with remarkable trust. This trust will extend to all things "...a space on the plane of manners, or even of morals..." in order to lead him "...forth into the world..."

Yet, the process of their acquaintance must also continue on a more mundane and usual level as they exchange cards and chatter. Strether says, out of nowhere, that he is from Woollett, Massachusetts. Maria laughs, as would most Americans. There are just certain places that when you say you are from there, that fact alone conjures up images. And the fact that the fifty-five year old Strether says the name of his hometown with slight shyness, slight embarrassment and a smile adds to the situation. Maria laughs and everyone "knows the worst," that Strether comes from the epitome (or as James says in the Foreword, the "heart") of American New England.

What exactly this means is more or less summed up in the way that Strether speaks. He gazes, without meeting his listener's eyes, "a motion that was frequent with him in talk" but interestingly enough does not diminish the force of his words. It is as if by staring at his listener's eyes he will see too much, too deeply into their soul and vice-versa, which is another way he has of shielding his own emotions. As Maria's and his conversation continues a most significant comment is exchanged. Strether, caught by Maria in repeatedly looking at his watch does not say as we might expect, "Do you have an appointment?" but rather she notices something which lies at the very core of Strether and Woollett, Massachusetts. That is, the problem of "enjoyment." This was an ancient battle for the Puritans. Life on this earth was not for enjoying. It was to be a time for suffering, of searching the soul for sin, being wretched and guilty, of hoping for the very remote possibility of entering a bleak heaven. One of the biggest issues in James's novel is the fact that Woollett thinks that Chad is simply enjoying himself too much in Europe--that is not the way to live. Of course Strether is not that dogmatic himself, but he still carries the feeling with him that enjoyment means something sinful must have caused it. Maria, in turn, comments ruefully on the "failure to enjoy" which she sees has been Woollett's defining characteristic.

The final remarks in this chapter concern two related aspects of Strether's Woollett consciousness. Strether acknowledges the part Maria can play in "showing him"; she will rise to the role of guide, as she has so often done before, but she emphasizes her desire in such a way that Strether parries her earnestness by saying:

"Oh I'm afraid of you!"

But really, what he is saying is that he is aftaid of himself. He is afraid of letting go, not just to a woman, but to any kind of experience that will lead to an arousal of the senses (meaning "enjoyment") or to a questioning of what constituted his entire life up until this point. It will be a journey into the unknown with its accompaning "terror." Maria asks him to "give himself up," he cannot, at least at this moment. She again asks if he really wants to, he says yes, as she accepts his desire to "try" and with a firm "Trust me!" they return to the hotel together to encounter Waymarsh.

"Dear dyspetic" Waymarsh was waiting for Strether in typically New England fashion; "joylessly." If anyone could be "joyless" in the beautiful town of Chester, it has to be someone like Waymarsh. From the beginning the contrast of his position with that of Strether's and as opposed to Maria is made evident. Maria attempts to remind him of their previous introduction, but he does not seem to be able to remember much about this extraordinary woman. The prospective relationship between Maria and Strether has been staged to be all portents for being an exciting and limitless one, yet Waymarsh thinks in terms of the "limits of such a relation." Strether can quickly see, it is that blantant, that Waymarsh has failed and will continue to fail "to profit by her." Thus the juxtaposition that will structure the rest of the book is confirmed in the first paragraph of the second chapter.

James continues to associate the idea of "limit" with Waymarsh. Strether, after a brief welcome with Waymarsh returns to his own room. His first feeling upon entering it is one confinement. Here is another striking paradox. America and therefore Americans are usually thought of as the people of a land of frontier, of limitless ideas and the availability of pure physical space in which to expand. But this is not the feeling that Strether had while living in Woollett or in his encounter with his old friend. It was only upon his departure from the United States and especially at his arrival in Europe that such a consciousnesss of freedom has come. America has been mentally and sensuously confining while Europe, from the moment of his arrival, has been expansive and emotional.

Throughout all this rush of experience, Strether is conscious of not "knowing" himself. His carefully controlled life is coming apart in interesting ways. But further self-reflection is put aside for the moment in order to listen to Waymarsh (whose favorite words concern the fact that he does know himself) talk. The picture James paints of Waymarsh, his "note" is one of familiar New England self-flagellation. Waymarsh sits himself in a "wilfully uncomfortable" position as much out of tune with his immediate surroundings as he his with Europe in general. But this is not so surprising. Waymarsh's physical description reminds one of Abraham Lincoln, so political, so American that his entire being seems perched in some "forward inclination" an attitude with which he sits through the "ordeal of Europe."

Waymarsh is the kind of character that James was determined that Strether not become.

Although as a lawyer he has been successful, much more than Strether has been in a material sense, his personal life is in shambles. His wife, from whom he is separated, lives in hotels and paints her face; a whorish existence about which no doubt much is known in New England. That represents in Woollett's eyes what happens to those who are seduced by Europe, and the effects of this kind of marriage, "the cold twilight" that has fallen on Waymarsh's life, renders him a pitiful, if not tragic figure. Yet, despite this, Strether feels a sense of inadequacy beside Waymarsh. It is, perhaps, a little surprising, over the question of money. Strether's lack of a sizable income makes him unable to look at "anyone in the face." In America, where ostensibly no class distinctions exist, there was and still is a definite distinction, or leveling based upon wealth. In Europe, one would be, as a foreigner and especially as an American, judged upon a different standard, one of intelligence or wit rather than income. This is also a point that Woollett cannot appreciate in regards to Chad. Why, they ask, does he apparently choose to give up a large income and the possibility for making even more money in order to stay in creaky old Europe? This point is clearly brought out in the different way in which Strether and Mrs. Pocock look at Chad. But this is straying from the limits of this paper. Suffice to say that the stage is being set for such a confrontation of values.

Strether's more immediate problem is one of how to deal with Waymarsh. Waymarsh is not happy in Europe, "...this ain't my kind of country" he says. He wants to go back home, he almost wails as Strether tucks him into bed. Waymarsh and Strether discuss the latter's reasons for coming to Europe, and the first subtle glimmerings of doubt as to the certainty of the relationship between Strether and Mrs. Newsome are assertainable. The reader's uncertainty is expanded by the flippant but telling quip with which the second chapter concludes. Strether's comment, "Neither, when it comes to that—!" implies the words "will she" (in reference to Mrs. Newsome) is accompanied by a laugh and most significantly, the word "escape."

The purpose of the third chapter differs in some respects from that of the proceeding two. In the first two chapters a careful juxtaposition has been created between the forces with which Strether will have to contend. The third chapter presents in microcosm how Maria and Waymarsh will each exercise their pull on Strether; and how Strether's own consciousness of change functions in the the midst of all this.

Strether asks Maria to teach him how to order an English breakfast, but immediately after that request, while they wait for his meal in the garden, Strether's own personality asserts itself. It is important to keep in mind that Strether is a well-educated man with a respectable profession, thus not wholly insensitive or unable to experience the atmosphere of Europe on his own. "The ordered English garden, in the freshness of the day, was delightful to Strether, who liked the sound, under his feet, of the tight fine gravel, packed with the chronic damp, and who had the idlest eye for the deep smoothness of turf and the clean curves of paths."

The garden is extremely pleasing to Strether and his perceptions are pleasing to read. It gives more definition to the character of Strether, showing him able to contribute his own impressions and "carry a point of his own."

Waymarsh, Strether and Maria spend the day shopping together. Maria and Strether operate at the level of "confirmed fellowship" while Waymarsh strolls beside them in stricken silence" and shops with them in "ambiguous dumbness." Neither Strether or Maria quite know what to make of his behavior, but more and more Strether feels the closer kinship with Maria and Waymarsh retreats into the world which Strether now understands to be one of "previous virtue."

This quality of virtue, so aptly referred to in the past tense, will become the keystone to the arch of the novel. There will be the virtue of Woollett, of responsibilities to Mrs. Newsome and of promises unspoken, but truly implied. And then there will be the virtue of the present tense. The virtue of attachment, that Strether already feels between himself and Maria, and will be used to describe the relationship between Chad and Madame de Vionnet.

The subject of virtue is exactly opposite to what Strether and Maria suppose Waymarsh to be thinking about:

> "He thinks us sophisticated, he thinks us worldly, he thinks us wicked, he thinks us all sorts of queer things..."

Strether cannot quite understand why, although he has known Waymarsh for a long time, and Maria just for a day, they are already at such odds about the situation. Strether wishes perhaps that Waymarsh would think about the situation a little more deeply. But Maria gently reminds him that:

> "For what do you take people, that they're able to say words about anything, able remorselessly to analyse? There are not many like you and me. It will be only because he's too stupid."

Strether takes Maria's comment to mean "stupid" in the sense that Waymarsh somehow might lack enough intelligence to be able to be successful in some easily measurable way such as financially, so his reply to Maria is that Waymarsh has been, on the contrary, quite successful. However she is not really talking about success in that way. What she means is stupid in the sense that Waymarsh is destitute of sensation, consciousness, thought or feeling. His faculties are deadened, in other words, he cannot enjoy the crunch of gravel underneath his feet in the ordered English garden.

Waymarsh's strange act, which brings to a close the first book is a wonderfully sublime acting-out of what Maria has observed about Waymarsh and correctly called "stupid." As Strether and Maria finish up their shopping, Waymarsh dashes into the jeweler's to buy something. While he spends his money, in a glittering, lavish setting, (where else but in

a jewelry shop is there a more obvious way to spend money?) Strether, eyeing the glittering front of the shop says to Maria, "It doesn't alter the fact that you're expensive. You've cost me already—!" She wants to know what he means and Strether says, "Well my past—in one lump."

Thus, while one transaction, Waymarsh's in the jewelry store, is occurring, another more important exchange has occurred between Strether and Maria. Strether's remark is very simple, and almost flippant, characteristic of his and Maria's conversation which discuss very profound changes and experiences they have undergone in rather jaunty language. James has excellently crafted this contrast. Waymarsh is in the jewelry store, boorishly spending money in typically American fashion, while outside Strether has "paid for" the lost of his past in the form of his tribute to Maria.

In the way of summation Maria makes Strether feel like a European, at least as close as an American can feel. Waymarsh makes Strether feel like an unsuccessful American, hopefully as uncomfortable in Europe as he himself is. But these personalities will not only provide two opposing points of reference for Strether as he undertakes his mission, they will overlap and touch each other. Maria's avowed purpose in her contacts with Americans has been to show them around and send them home as quickly as possible. Strether himself is not immune from the strictures of his upbringing as shown by his initial understanding of the nature of Chad's "virtuous attachment" and symptoms of his own form of "sacred rage" emerge from time to time.

All of this is part of what James has made his novel chock full of. The nuance of life, the range of emotions, feelings and actions that are no more obvious than quiet breathing at times and just as necessary. Hopefully this paper has suggested the "note" and others will contribute theirs in a discussion of a novel which remains a rich source for examination.