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Henry James at Any Rate

By Ross Wilson, *University of Cambridge*

In the preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, James attempts to draw a lesson from the many impressions by which he was “assault[ed]” while walking the streets of London during the period of the novel’s composition:

There was a moment at any rate when they offered me no image more vivid than that of some individual sensitive nature or fine mind, some small obscure intelligent creature whose education should have been almost wholly derived from them, capable of profiting by all the civilisation, all the accumulations to which they testify, yet condemned to see these things only from outside—in mere quickened consideration, mere wistfulness and envy and despair. (FW 1087)

Again, in the same preface, having given not at all a “long list” of the “intense *perceivers*” in his own novels, he returns to his consideration of the character of Hyacinth:

I had had for a long time well before me, at any rate, my small obscure but ardent observer of the “London world,” saw him roam and wonder and yearn, saw all the unanswered questions and baffled passions that might ferment in him. . . . (1096)

And again reverting to Hyacinth a little later:

I remember at any rate feeling myself all in possession of little Hyacinth’s consistency, as I have called it, down at Dover during certain weeks that were none too remotely precedent to the autumn of 1885 and the appearance, in the “Atlantic Monthly” again, of the first chapters of the story. (1100)

As it happens, the moment early in *The Princess Casamassima* when Millicent Henning declares she does not care whether or not Hyacinth is clever is one of the examples cited by the *OED* for the use of “at any rate” in the sense of “at all events; at least; anyhow, anyway”: “He had at any rate a mind sufficiently enriched to see what she meant” (*PC2* 87), an important revision, incidentally, of the first edition—“and Hyacinth was at any rate quick-witted enough to see what she meant by that” (*PC1* 104)—elevating to a discrete sentence what had been a merely glossing sub-clause and tellingly seeking to emphasize Hyacinth’s mental enrichment (the relations between mental and material riches are of course a leading concern of the novel). This sense of “at any rate” seems to have emerged only around 1730 and is still current (there is a pleasing menace to the latest example cited in the *OED*, which comes from Ruth Rendell’s 1988 novel *Veiled One*: “He paused and smiled, or at any rate bared his teeth”). In what follows, I want to take “at any rate” as a leitmotif, not for a fuller discussion of *The Princess Casamassima* but rather for a discussion of the shifts of accent attendant upon the figuratively and conceptually involved adumbrations of critical positions—along with the concomitant apologies for their length—that, I hope to show, characterize the prefaces to the New York Edition.

Many discussions of the prefaces have, of course, sought to undermine the canonization of them as a kind of *summa novelistica*. David McWhirter claimed in 1995 that the view of the New York Edition as constituting “a systematic modern *Poetics* of fiction . . . has rarely been seriously questioned” (2). However, Laurence B. Holland in *The Expense of Vision*, his classic study of 1964, had already sought to emphasize “that the strength as well as the tenor of the essays derives rather from the euphoria and anxieties of James’s intimate involvement with his fiction” (155), a point echoed by Ross Posnock (in the collection of essays edited by McWhirter) when he emphasizes that the prefaces “do not offer a serene retrospect of James’s organic artistry but instead confess acceptance of makeshift compromises rather than any fully achieved formal harmony” (34). Comparably, Simon During, in his important call for a re-evaluation of the relationship between “professional, amateur and confessional criticism” (1285), pays homage to what he reads as James’s “mix of technical and confessional criticism” (1281). Further readings of the prefaces have advanced perhaps more skeptical accounts of their attempts to hold in some ways incompatible critical impulses together (Goetz, Armstrong) and have seen them as in fact radically destabilizing key critical *topoi* to which they frequently return (“There is nothing unproblematic about centers or circumferences in any of the prefaces” [Sedgwick 227]), or, somewhat contrastingly, have taken them as ultimately miscarried attempts at the intellectual colonization of their readers’ critical faculties (Rundle). Various as such readings emanating from different critical perspectives are, they are all at least implicitly responding to the famous claim that Blackmur made in the opening paragraph of his introduction (not, note, his preface) to *The Art of the Novel*, namely, that

[h]e had to elucidate and to appropriate for the critical intellect the substance and principle of his career as an artist, and he had to do this—such as the idiosyncrasy of his mind—specifically, example following lucid example, and with a consistency of part with part that amounted almost to the consistency of a mathematical equation, so that, as in the *Poetics*, if his premises were accepted his conclusions must be taken as inevitable. (*AN* vii)

Of course, Blackmur has James as authority for this view of the matter, since already in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, James casts the prefaces not as distinct introductions to discrete novels or collections of tales—or, at least, not only as that—but as “the continuity of an artist’s endeavour” (FW 1039–40). Though he did not live to see it, James envisaged the collection of the prefaces in a letter to W. D. Howells, quoted, naturally, by Blackmur: “They ought, collected together, none the less, to form a sort of comprehensive manual or *vademecum* for aspirants in our arduous profession” (AN viii). This is certainly James in what Blackmur describes as his “proud” attitude in relation to the prefaces.

Gérard Genette, in his key to all mythologies for anyone interested in the texts that go before, beneath, behind, to one side, and otherwise around other texts, gives Blackmur’s collection as one example of the kinds of things that can be done with prefaces:

A preface, authorial or allographic, may become after the event a chapter in a collection of essays . . . ; indeed, after the event a preface may become a chapter in a collection of prefaces, either all autographic, such as James’s in *The Art of the Novel* (posthumous collection of 1934), or all allographic, such as Borges’s in his *Prólogos* of 1975. (173)

For Genette, then, there is nothing troubling with James’s vision for his prefaces, nor with what in fact became of them under Blackmur’s editorship. But at the conclusion to his chapter on what he carefully designates “the prefatorial situation,” Genette declares that

the preface, in its very message, postulates that its reader is poised for an imminent reading of the text (or, in the case of a postface, has just concluded a reading), without which its preparatory or retrospective comments would be largely meaningless and, naturally, useless. (194)

This appears rather drastically to qualify Genette’s earlier contention that a preface may undergo a transmutation into what he describes as “a chapter in a collection of essays”—a slightly puzzling description in any case, in terms of the shifts it tacitly imagines occurring between genres, since it would appear to suggest that one item in a collection of essays is not in fact an essay but rather a chapter, which had in any case once been a preface. Here, however, a preface that does not stand before the text for which it prepares is “largely meaningless and, naturally, useless.”

Genette is perhaps going too far in his withering judgment on prefaces that do not stand before the texts they preface, but nevertheless his reading provides support to commentators on the prefaces, including those mentioned above, keen to “liberate” them, in Herschel Parker’s phrase, from the structure imposed on them by *The Art of the Novel*.¹ Blackmur’s edition “severs the prefaces from the narratives they precede” (Pearson 19, see also 20, where the prefaces are “amputated”). Pearson’s complaint is revealing, however, since it does not in fact chiefly concern Blackmur’s imposition of a bastardized order on the prefaces—making them a grotesque Frankenstein’s monster of novelistic theory—but rather the prior stage of surgical, gory excision from the bodies to which they properly belong. Blackmur, in Pearson’s account, is as

much the enemy of the prefaces' proper cohesion with their novels and tales as he is the imposer of order.

James himself also had, as Blackmur acknowledges, a more "modest," or at least more nuanced, attitude to the prefaces. Announcing his intentions for them in a memorandum to Charles Scribner's Sons, he makes the following remarks:

Lastly, I desire to furnish each book, whether consisting of a single fiction, or of several minor ones, with a freely colloquial and even, perhaps, as I may say, confidential preface or introduction, representing, in a manner, the history of the work or of the group, representing more particularly, perhaps, a frank critical talk about its subject, its origin, its place in the whole artistic chain, and embodying, in short, whatever of interest there may be to be said about it. I have never committed myself in print in any way, even so much as by three lines to a newspaper, on the subject of anything I have written, and I feel as if I should come to this part of the business with a certain freshness of appetite and effect. My hope would be, at any rate, that it might count as a feature of a certain importance in any such new and more honorable presentation of my writings. (*HJL* 367)

This letter enacts the process of James's conceiving of the prefaces. The apparently merely terminological vacillation—"confidential preface or introduction"—may, in fact, betoken a deeper uncertainty at the moment of writing this letter, at least, about the character of the texts that, of course, became the prefaces: a preface, especially, perhaps, a "confidential" one, is not the same as an introduction, at least because a preface, somewhat passively, stands before something else whereas an introduction actively leads into it.² James, of course, is not altogether sure at the moment of writing this letter what the prefaces (which are not yet decidedly "the Prefaces") are to be. Both of James's deployments of "perhaps" in the above passage act as restraints on his more confident assertions about the nature of the prefaces, the first tempering the freedom and colloquialism of the prospected texts, the second, likewise, tempering the frankness with which the "talk" of the prefaces is to be undertaken. James's descriptions of what are to become the prefaces here settle on a characteristic "at any rate," which signals the retreat to a general hope for these texts: they are to be important.

In what follows I want to focus on the characteristic features of the argumentation and metaphorical elaboration of the prefaces that are displayed by their recourse at crucial junctures to this little phrase, "at any rate." The prefaces frequently fall into a rhythm of grandiose theoretical set piece followed by apparent apology, elaborated authorial and authoritative statement followed by rueful summary. Both in James's hands as well as in the linguistic record more broadly "at any rate" paradoxically announces the general and limited significance of the statements it introduces. This is evident, for instance, in the *OED*'s explanation of "at any rate" as both "at all events" and "at least"—as, that is, announcing an expansive claim for the universal application of what is being declared, on the one hand, and a retreat to what may minimally be granted, on the other.

Attention to the occurrences of the phrase "at any rate" in the prefaces does indeed bring into view an array of key characteristics, and at least initially puzzling features, of the prefaces themselves. If we return to the example of James's arrival at

the character of Hyacinth Robinson in the composition of *The Princess Casamassima*—“There was a moment at any rate when they offered me no image more vivid than that of some individual sensitive nature or fine mind”—we will see that this occurrence of this delimiting, in some ways apologetic, phrase culminates a movement at the start of which (at the start of the preface itself) James had indicated that he was presenting the reader with “[t]he simplest account of the origin of ‘The Princess Casamassima’” that he could think of before developing an astute, phenomenologically detailed, and finely interwoven account of how “[p]ossible stories, presentable figures, rise from the thick jungle as the observer moves, fluttering up like startled game” (FW 1086). And other occurrences likewise bring into view the larger movements otherwise only dimly discernible in the prefaces. It is, for example, after his sweeping statement in the preface to *The Tragic Muse* that the recognition of the importance of art has become “more than a custom, [it] has become on occasion almost a fury” that James returns to his own practice of composition and rereading: “The more I turn my pieces over, at any rate, the more I now see I must have found in them, and I remember how, once well in presence of my three typical examples, my fear of too ample a canvas quite dropped” (FW 1106–07). But such restraint, of course, does not last long: this is the beginning of the long paragraph in which James creates the capacious class of “large loose baggy monsters” to which *The Newcomes*, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, and (as James calls it) *Peace and War* all belong. Another striking example is to be found at the opening of the second paragraph of the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*. The long first paragraph to that preface begins in storytelling mode and, in particular, with the Dickensian moment of Christmas Eve: “It was years ago, I remember, one Christmas Eve when I was dining with friends” (FW 1138). The storytelling beginning soon gives way—in the second clause of the first sentence, in fact—to the recuperative reflection on the origins of composition that is fundamental to James’s criticism in the prefaces: “a lady beside me made in the course of talk one of those allusions that I have always found myself recognising on the spot as ‘germs.’” The specific situation—Christmas Eve, the (unnamed) lady beside James, the flow of dinner party conversation—is quickly rendered an example of the general point that James wishes to make concerning the immediate recognizability (to him, that is) of the “germs” of composition, a general point that James develops into a phenomenology, we might say, of the germ and its recognition. The second paragraph, with its “at any rate,” puts us back around the dinner table on that Christmas Eve and hence returns us to that story whose initiation quickly gave way to critical extrapolation:

So it was, at any rate, that when my amiable friend, on the Christmas Eve, before the table that glowed safe and fair through the brown London night, spoke of such an odd matter as that a good lady in the north, always well looked on, was at daggers drawn with her only son, ever hitherto exemplary, over the ownership of the valuable furniture of a fine old house just accruing to the young man by his father’s death, I instantly became aware, with my “sense for the subject,” of the prick of inoculation; the whole of the *virus*, as I have called it, being infused by that single touch. (1139–40)

The combination of the paragraph-break and the summative “So it was, at any rate” announces a break with the metaphorically involved and phenomenologically intricate

theory of the “germ” and at the same time returns us to the specific situation with which the preface began. The opening sentence of the preface’s second paragraph looks both fore and aft: its presentation of the recollection of the moment of inspiration is also the anticipation of the narrative of *The Spoils of Poynton* itself. It is perhaps revealing that the “only son” of the “lady in the north” was “ever hitherto exemplary”: his filial exemplarity may now be compromised, but he becomes thereby all the more the exemplar for the story that James will compose. Moreover, while James’s “at any rate” here certainly returns the reader to the initiating situation, to the ground for what James wants to say both in the story itself and in its preface, that ground is again quickly exploited, metaphorically and conceptually. James, that is, is conscious of the demands his recollective and critical elaborations may place on his reader, but the apologetic consolidations of basic tenets announced by “at any rate” in turn serve as the basis for repeated, renewed articulations of just such elaborations.

James’s prefaces, then, mount through extensive trails of metaphorical reasoning to the peaks of critical declamation before explicitly descending from their proudest eminences. They perhaps share something of the characteristics ascribed to the preface as form by Søren Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous preface-writer, “Nicolaus Notabene,” when he declares of prefaces in the preface to his book of prefaces without books (“Notabene” is keen to provoke vertigo in his reader) that

[n]ow they are long, now short; now bold, now shy; now stiffly formal, now slapdash; now worried and almost repentant, now self-confident and almost brash; now not entirely without an eye for the weaknesses of the book, now stricken with blindness, now perceiving these better than anyone else; now the preface is the first distillation of the product, now an aftertaste of it. And all of this is purely ceremonial. (“Notabene” 3)

James’s prefaces are certainly on occasion “not entirely without an eye for the weaknesses of the book,” they are rarely ever “purely ceremonial,” not least since ceremony itself is never *purely* ceremonial. In any case, what I have sought to describe as his apologetic tone is indeed a frequent feature of the prefaces, often accompanying the most critically assertive moments in them. So, for example, in the preface to *The Aspern Papers*, James reflects on the complex workings of the Florentine setting in which he both did and did not, quite, find the situation for the tale, before remarking, “All of which I note, however, perhaps with too scant relevance to the inexhaustible charm of Roman and Florentine memories” (FW 1174)—a striking admission, when the inexhaustible charm of those memories had been precisely at issue in the preceding discussion, and one that has the curious effect of both licensing the reader not to submit entirely to James’s authority and of emphasizing the rigor that James applies to his own statements. Then in the preface to *The Reverberator*, James begins to articulate the distinction between anecdote and drama that will play a crucial role in his preface to “The Author of Beltraffio,” only, here, to acknowledge that “[a]fter which perhaps too vertiginous explanatory flight I feel that I drop indeed to the very concrete and comparatively trivial origin of my story” (1194; compare the distinction between anecdote and drama, 1239–45)—an apology both for the “vertiginous explanatory flight” and, of course, for the bumpy landing after it. James, indeed, is again aware that his explanations might do little in the way of explaining, as he

acknowledges in the preface to “Lady Barbarina” (perhaps recollecting Byron’s reaction, in the Dedication to *Don Juan*, to Coleridge’s attempts to explain metaphysics: “I wish he would explain his Explanation” [16]):

If it be asked then . . . why they [*The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*] deviate from that natural harmony, why the author resorts to the greater extravagance when the less would serve, the answer is simply that the course taken has been, on reflexion, the course of the greater amusement. That is an explanation adequate, I admit, only when itself a little explained—but I shall have due occasion to explain it. (FW 1209)

It would be eminently possible to furnish further examples of such self-admonishing summary abbreviations—from the preface to “The Author of Beltraffio” (“Elliptic, I allow, and much of a skipping of stages, so bare an account of such performances” [FW 1241]) or from *The Ambassadors* (“All of which, again, is but to say that the steps, for my fable, placed themselves with a prompt and, as it were, functional assurance” [1311]) or, at the very conclusion to James’s prefatory enterprise, from the preface to *The Golden Bowl* (“All of which amounts doubtless but to saying that as the whole conduct of life consists of things done, which do other things in their turn, just so our behaviour and its fruits are essentially one and continuous and persistent and unquenchable” [1340]). All of which but amounts to saying that James is constantly self-revising in the prefaces, even as they stand before the great effort of rereading and revision that is the New York Edition. There is in the prefaces no concealment or denial of revision but rather its repeated and explicit performance.

Nowhere is this rhythm of apology, abbreviating summary, and self-revision more evident than in some of the most celebrated passages of the prefaces—and if it is the case that the prefaces are marked, on the one hand, by the building of elaborate metaphorical and conceptual structures aimed at explaining James’s art and, on the other, by the consciousness that the elaboration of just such structures might not be wholly appropriate to texts of this kind, or might try the patience of the readers of them, then this is precisely to be expected. Put another way, it is at just those moments of loftiest critical declamation and most abstract theoretical speculation that James is most likely to assume the at once apologetic and assertive tone characteristic of the prefaces. The first such celebrated moment is from the first of the prefaces, that to *Roderick Hudson*:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it. All of which will perhaps pass but for a supersubtle way of pointing the plain moral that a young embroiderer of the canvas of life soon began to work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle, and of the tendency inherent in his many-

coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes. (FW 1041)

It is little noted that this famous set piece is immediately followed by an apology for it.³ That apology is, however, a somewhat qualified one. For James to write, “[a]ll of which will perhaps pass but for a supersubtle way of pointing the plain moral,” etc., is perhaps not entirely free of falsity in its modesty. Subtlety is a Jamesian value, after all, and indeed evident to a super degree here. Moreover, as soon as the need for a halt to the description of relations has been announced, relations reassert themselves, as if uncontrollably: the rare usage, already by this date, of “pointing a moral”—a phrase, nevertheless, that recurs repeatedly in James’s critical writing—suggests the ensuing metaphor of needlepoint. Relations stop nowhere indeed, and it is the critic’s job to call a halt to them—and then set them running again.

Famous as it has become as an article of novel theory, the above passage from the preface to *Roderick Hudson* and, crucially, its apology—and, even more crucially, the resurgence of the kind of critical, metaphorical elaboration for which that apology is proffered—may be taken to imply a great deal about James’s handling of the preface as form and, especially here, of the kind of relations that obtain between the preface and that which it prefaces. Prefaces are, of course, related to what they preface and often to such an extent that they share family traits—particular ways of speaking, as well as large commonly held attitudes—with their relations. Note, for instance, the repetition of “arches” in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, a text that spends so much time considering the genesis of Isabel Archer (FW 1080), or the quite explicit play on the central drama of “Paste” in James’s articulation of the relation (another relation) of his tale to its mirrored model in Maupassant’s “La Parure,” when he states that “a new setting for my pearls—and as different as possible from the other—had of course withal to be found” (1243). But the preface is to be a junior relation—it must not be allowed to usurp the place of the, as it were, senior text—at the same time that its relations with what it prefaces must of necessity stop short of identity. The sequence of critical declamation, tentative apology, and resumed critical extrapolation is the rhythm of the preface as form and such, certainly, is the rhythm of James’s prefaces.

I want to conclude in—or, rather, just on the way out of—the house of fiction. After the elaboration of that brilliant critical conceit, James declares, with a sweeping gesture that should by now be familiar:

All this is a long way round, however, for my word about my dim first move toward “The Portrait,” which was exactly my grasp of a single character—an acquisition I had made, moreover, after a fashion not here to be retraced. Enough that I was, as seemed to me, in complete possession of it, that I had been so for a long time, that this had made it familiar and yet had not blurred its charm, and that, all urgently, all tormentingly, I saw it in motion and, so to speak, in transit. This amounts to saying that I saw it as bent upon its fate—some fate or other; *which*, among the possibilities, being precisely the question. . . . (FW 1075)

Again, as we saw, for example, in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, this apparently simplifying description yields up another metaphorical description—which is, again,

apologized for (“That may be, I recognise, a somewhat superfine analogy” [1076])—and again, only slightly later, James confesses his digression from the focal point of the character of Isabel Archer, “for I have lost myself once more, I confess, in the curiosity of analysing the structure” (1077), before, a little further on, declaring of his significant elaboration of distinctions between form and essence, which in turn develops into the expression of claim on the “living wage” of the reader’s minimal attention: “All of which is perhaps but a gracefully devious way of saying that Henrietta Stackpole was a good example, in ‘The Portrait,’ of the truth to which I just adverted” (1082)—namely, that certain characters belong only indirectly to the subject of a novel. That admission is itself gracefully devious, or perhaps in fact deviously graceful, in convicting James of deviousness, yes, but also of grace—and doing so, at any rate, while making a show of James’s willingness to criticize himself criticizing himself. In the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, prefatory material, said James, addressing Coburn’s photographs for the New York Edition, “should exactly be *not* competitive and obvious, should on the contrary plead its case with some shyness” (1327). James’s prefaces plead their case with some—a nicely indefinite quantity—shyness, and at least they have a case to plead.

NOTES

¹Genette fails to take account of prefaces that are not attached to any other text, for example, those gathered in “Notabene.”

²Relying, here, on the etymologies of the two terms, of which James must have been at least dimly aware, no matter how much “preface” and “introduction” have come to be synonymous. For discussion of the relation between preface and introduction, see Derrida (1–65) and Kamuf (1–21), especially Kamuf’s disarmingly simple remark that “whereas the preface presents the book, an introduction presents the book’s argument” (1).

³See also Hale’s reference to “a famous set piece in the Prefaces” (83), namely, the “house of fiction” set piece in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*. It is a good description for those moments in the prefaces that have come to be celebrated in the history of criticism on the novel form, not least because it implicitly recognizes the theatrical and painterly tendency in James’s critical, as well as fictional, writing. For a short history of this phrase, see the entry for “set piece” in the *OED*. Note in particular 1 (a), “A painting, or a sculptured group of people,” and 2, “*Theatr.* A piece of scenery, either flat or three-dimensional and usu. free-standing, that represents a single feature such as a tree, a gate, or the like”; sense 1 (c), “A (passage of) formal composition in prose or verse; a discourse, narrative, etc., composed according to a set pattern,” is, apparently, only first attested in 1932.

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