



Wang Ling
王玲 著

Inside the World of *The Ambassadors*

An Analysis of Henry James's Periodic Style

探索语言的迷宫

亨利·詹姆斯〈专使〉圆周文体研究



 云南大学出版社

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ISBN 978-7-81112-504-7



9 787811 125047 >

定价：25.00元

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此为试读, 需要完整PDF请访问: www.ertongbook.com

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

探索语言的迷宫:亨利·詹姆斯《专使》圆周文体研究:英文/王玲著. —昆明:云南大学出版社,2007
ISBN 978-7-81112-504-7

I. 探… II. 王… III. 长篇小说—文学研究—美国—现代—英文 IV. I712.074

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2007)第 174013 号

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策划编辑:蔡红华

责任编辑:叶枫红

封面设计:丁群亚

出版发行:云南大学出版社

印 装:昆明市五华区教育委员会印刷厂

开 本:850mm×1168mm 1/32

印 张:7.375

字 数:178千

版 次:2007年10月第1版

印 次:2007年10月第1次印刷

书 号:ISBN 978-7-81112-504-7

定 价:25.00元

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Foreword

Henry James is said to have advised a friend who was about to tackle his novel *The Ambassadors*, to read five pages a day and not to lose track of the narrative thread. Whatever this may say about James and his friend, it clearly reminds us that there is more than one way to read a book. In the volume at hand we have the opportunity to see *The Ambassadors* in a new light, as provided by an unexpected source: a Chinese scholar with a remarkable command of English who, beginning with the smallest details of vocabulary and grammar, develops persuasive arguments about James's style and its integration into the book's message.

Dr. Wang Ling's particular expertise in the iconography of ancient Chinese folk music, along with her background in Chinese art and literature, has surely helped shape the sensibility she brings to this study. She has used tools of Western discourse analysis to provide hard information. As an example of where this approach can lead: a count of all common words shows the words "wonderful" and "wonderfully" to have been used a total of 102 times in the

novel. Data reporting in the wrong hands can be a lifeless end in itself, but consider Dr. Wang's elegant comment: " 'Wonderful' is a word that blurs distinctions of value and opinion by its soothing flattery and its easy extravagance." The remark deftly suggests the sumptuous ambiance that James evokes, as in speaking of "some light pleasant perfect work of art". Wang points out that the word "wonderful" is used as a code-word for referring to the elite group of characters among whom the protagonist Strether finds himself, and one that is often used by them with implications varying according to who is being described.

Dr. Wang conducts the reader through other verbal repetitions and the various parts of speech with many penetrating comments, moving on to abstraction, rhetoric and colloquialism. Especially incisive are her pages on nominalisation, that is, the replacement of a verb or adjective by the cognate noun, which then is often used instead of a person as the subject of a sentence, so reducing the dynamism and the human participation in the slow flow of abstraction. Most, yes, most of James's verbs and adjectives are modified by two adverbs. In succeeding pages on the use of diverse word categories including subject, predicate, complement, adjuncts, subordinate elements, modal verbs and negatives, Wang offers a wealth of insights, moving on to the cleft sentences (begun by "it", "what", and "there") much favoured by James, with stimulating

comments on the role of the what-clause, which contributes to both delay and abstraction. The “there” sentence can reach extremes: to say that Strether had an impression, “There had been literally a moment at which it appeared there might be something in him” Wang deals with these challenges to stylistic convention with something more than patience: warmth and sympathy in which the reader is invited to share.

Dr. Wang’s discoveries in syntax of course go deeper. She outlines the historical development in English prose of periodic phrasing, in which the reader’s clear understanding of a lengthy sentence is postponed until its end. Sentence patterns are rigorously described and studied, with emphasis on the novel’s grammatical peculiarities: “Expletive particles, insertion and inversion are the main factors in James’s periodic sentence structure.” The dilatory periodic style both voices and conditions patterns of thinking that shape the plot and create in Strether’s mind a leisurely subjectivity, postponing interpretation of his experiences until some time after their initial perception. A flood of impressions seem to await the final key—a verb, perhaps—that will give them cohesion and clear meaning. Sample analyses of passages demonstrate some of the points already made and move into broader, more subjective responses to James’s writing, seeing “a complexity that is not of idea, but of relationship between ideas”. Particularly fascinating to her

are the interplay of form and content, of grammar and sense, as when she states, "The elaborate relationships between the subordinate and the main clauses reflect James's concern about the relations among persons, events and psychological states", or when she writes, regarding Strether's habit of postponement, of "a succession of intransitive beginnings that prefigure no particular end", or refers to his resistance to "reality's syntax of statement", which must in the end complete its intended meaning.

A question must enter the reader's mind, on first opening the book, as to whether an observer with a background so far removed, whose tacit assumptions and cultural background are little-known and whose reactions are surely unpredictable, can have much of value to tell us about one of our distinguished authors. A careful look into the book will provide the answer: its distant origins, combined with Western-style discipline and an original mind, have produced a valuable work of cultural cross-fertilisation, including hard data useful to the scholar as well as surprising, satisfying insights into "a supremely civilised effort" to relate events and people to their surroundings.

Thomas Montgomery, emeritus
Tulane University, New Orleans, U. S. A.
August 6th, 2007

Acknowledgements

Henry James is so famous for his complicated and difficult language that few English native speakers will take the pains to read and understand his long novels. My curiosity was aroused by the challenge, and in 1994 I decided to read one of James's three late novels, *The Ambassadors*, but it was not available in China. Therefore, I turned to one of my American friends, Dr. George Langeler, former president of Oberlin College, for help. It was generous of him to buy a hard copy of *The Ambassadors* in Oberlin and send it to me as a present. My inquiry into the periodic style of *The Ambassadors* was first carried out in 1995 under the supervision of Professor Zhang Zheng, who discussed with me each development of my research, checked my thesis carefully, and suggested possible improvements.

When I was a visiting scholar at the School of English Studies of the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom in the year 2000, the thesis went through the scrutiny of two world-famous scholars, Professor Ronald Carter and Professor Peter Stockwell. Professor Carter, who

was then Head of the School of English Studies, thought highly of my research results and recommended that I should pursue my PhD programme. Professors Carter and Stockwell both wrote references for my application for a PhD programme. I was offered a place as a PhD candidate at the School of English Studies of the University of Nottingham in April, 2000, and Professor Vimala Herman was appointed as my prospective PhD supervisor. Meanwhile Dr. Robbie Dewa, special lecturer at the School of English Studies of the University of Nottingham, was also impressed by my research results. With her strong recommendation, I was also offered a place as a PhD candidate at the Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language of Lancaster University in the United Kingdom. So much recognition confirmed my confidence in the value of the challenging stylistic research into James's work *The Ambassadors*.

The research project entitled "An Inquiry into the Periodic Style of *The Ambassadors*" was once sponsored by Taiwan Zhongliu Cultural and Educational Fund and Himalaya Fund in the year 2001. Altogether nine of my articles concerning the research results have been published, and two of them were published in *Foreign Literature Studies*, one of the national key journals in China. I am grateful to all the following journals for the publications: *Foreign Languages Studies*, *Cross-Cultural Communication Studies*,

as well as *Foreign Literature Studies*.

With the funding of the College of Foreign Languages and the English Department of Yunnan University, the research results as a whole can be sent to press. Before its publication, Professor Thomas Montgomery of Tulane University, New Orleans, the United States proofread the thesis carefully and provided me with constructive suggestions. I am greatly honoured to have Professor Montgomery write a foreword to my prospective book. I am also very thankful to Professor Li Jigang for his valuable advice on the title of the book. Last but not least, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Professor Shi Weida, Director of Yunnan University Press, and the editors, Professor Cai Honghua and Ms. Ye Fenghong, for their help and contribution to the publication. All in all, I am deeply grateful to all the above-mentioned scholars and the faculty of the College of Foreign Languages of Yunnan University for their help and support.

Wang Ling

Yunnan University, Kunming, P. R. China

August 26th, 2007

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Chapter I Periodic Syntax as Stylistic Choice

Section I Historical Review of Latinising Trends in English Literature

It is generally accepted that both John Milton (1608-1674) and Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) are masters of the English periodic style. Why, however, is it that Milton's periodic sentences are difficult to understand, whereas Johnson's are much easier and more readable? Each author's focus on various specific aspects of the English periodic syntactic pattern has created distinctive syntactic and stylistic effects. A discussion of the contrasts between their sentences calls first for a review of the syntactic and stylistic features of English periodic sentence patterns.

The historical study of English sentence patterns customarily begins with the Old English period (449-1066), in which speech-based parataxis in linear order, rather than hypotaxis, was the dominant syntactic pattern in prose. Parataxis is a sequence of clauses of similar status linked by

“and” or “then”, or merely by an implied temporal link, with few subordinate clauses or non-temporal cohesive ties. Simple parataxis is traditionally and widely associated with plain, often naive narration (Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism*, p. 164). In the Middle English period (1066-1500), however, the French trailing syntactic pattern was naturalised into English as a result of the French dominance after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Mainly made up of long and cumulative clauses, this new trailing syntactic pattern is distinguished from the old parataxis in that each of the clauses seems to generate the next one, and that different clauses are loosely connected. In a trailing sentence new information is added more and more in a rambling way. What a trailing sentence lacks is not length but logical links between different parts of the sentence. The trailing structure gives little impression that it has been arranged in a writer's mind in advance.

Up till the end of the fifteenth century the paratactic or coordinate native structure had continued to produce the best prose, and the cumulative trailing sentences echoing the mediaeval French had also been a popular narrative medium. Then, as a product of the English Renaissance in the sixteenth century, the Latin Ciceronian periodic sentence

pattern was introduced into English prose. The fashionable medium for the new humanist writers in the Renaissance became classical Latin, as exemplified by the great Roman philosopher and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 – 43 BC), and codified by the Roman rhetorician Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (AD 35-100), who is usually referred to as Quintilian in Anglicised form (Gordon, p. 73).

In the seventeenth century, John Milton made extensive use of the typical Ciceronian periodic sentences, which are long, involved and embedded. As a result of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the size of the reading public increased. The middle class came into being and made up the majority of the reading public, but the Miltonian complex embedding was hard for these people to understand. Then Samuel Johnson's innovative use of the periodic sentence pattern made concessions to the comprehension level of ordinary readers. Johnson led them to follow his reasoning process and rendered his meanings more accessible by simplifying the periodic structure. Johnson's popularity was largely due to his innovative use of the simplified periodic sentence pattern adapted to the balanced structure codified by Quintilian. Syntactic balance or parallelism refers to the repetition of the same syntactic form

(e. g. tense, voice, phrase or clause structure) in two or more neighbouring clauses or sentences. The meanings in the two parts of a balanced structure may be similar or contrastive. The similarity in syntactic form is a device of emphasis. The balanced structure reinforces its meaning by similarity, contrast or antithesis, or helps to build up an emotional climax. As a great exponent of Latinate prose after Milton, Johnson used a strongly cohesive and controlled periodic style appropriately in both his argumentative discourse and his fiction. In his time, the novel, which is par excellence a mode of writing that presents people in relationship to society, was becoming established as a prose form utilising a variety of strategies of presentation.

Syntax is the organisation of words in phrases, clauses and sentences. Thanks to Johnson's modification, popularisation and successful use of periodic syntax, by the nineteenth century that pattern had come to be regarded by English grammarians as the ultimate form of good prose. It was adopted by early novelists such as Henry Fielding (1707-1754) in the eighteenth century, and again by the grand novelist Henry James (1843-1916) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One of the basic trends of nineteenth-century literature