

HENRY JAMES

THE AMBASSADORS



THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

HENRY JAMES

The Ambassadors

EDITED WITH
AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
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THE WORLD'S CLASSICS
THE AMBASSADORS

HENRY JAMES was born in New York in 1843 of ancestry both Irish and Scottish. He received a remarkably cosmopolitan education in New York, London, Paris and Geneva, and entered law school at Harvard in 1862. After 1866, he lived mostly in Europe, at first writing critical articles, reviews, and short stories for American periodicals. He lived in London for more than twenty years, and in 1898 moved to Rye, where his later novels were written. Under the influence of an ardent sympathy for the British cause in the First World War, Henry James was in 1915 naturalised a British subject. He died in 1916.

In his early novels, which include *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), he was chiefly concerned with the impact of the older civilisation of Europe upon American life. He analysed English character with extreme subtlety in such novels as *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Awkward Age* (1899). In his last three great novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), he returned to the 'international' theme of the contrast of American and European character.

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INTRODUCTION

The Ambassadors is very largely a series of conversations. James's elderly hero Lambert Strether makes a stately progress to and fro amongst the members of the closed society he encounters in Paris, making the most discreet and indirect inquiries concerning the matter he has been sent from America to investigate: that of the relationship between young Chad Newsome and an unknown woman. Since James's standards for verisimilitude will not, in theory, allow him to address the reader directly, he has 'to set up a confidante or two' to be, like Maria Gostrey, both Strether's and 'the reader's friend' (Preface). Indeed, after the almost final revelation of the book, 'Strether filled up the time, as he had so often filled it before, by going to see Miss Gostrey.' Such interviews usually involve the mulling over of immediately preceding events. For it is interpretation, in all its senses, with which Strether and the reader are primarily concerned, even though it leads often enough to his and our bewilderment at the sheer complexity of it all. But then not all of his interlocutors prove to be strictly speaking truthful. James gloats in his Preface over the way in which he 'was to find the way open here to any amount of delightful dissimulation'.

Nevertheless, the true state of affairs as it affects Chad will probably become clear to the reader long before it does to 'poor Strether'. He seems at the start to have accepted a straightforward 'mission' of separating Chad from a 'wicked woman' and of bringing him home to an appreciation of his business opportunities and to a respectable marriage: indeed, 'in triumph as a kind of wedding present to mother'. Here begin mixed motives, for Mrs Newsome has indicated that she will express her gratitude by marrying her ambassador. There will be financial stability for all involved. However, although

Strether can perceive, in a 'flash', that Chad is a 'young man marked out by women' he doesn't for some time know which one. Nor does he or the reader yet appreciate what being 'marked out' might amount to. It is Strether's growing realisation that such a state may be no bad thing that is central to his quest for the truth.

For the structure of the novel, and our intellectual appreciation of its 'game of difficulty breathlessly played' as the Preface puts it, depends on our seeing it as a series, in each of its 'medallion'-like parts, of carefully graded and artfully deferred answers within a narrative which restricts itself to a single point of view and begins with a question. The very syntax of the novel, as Ian Watt has argued, reflects its overall plan as 'one of progressive yet artfully delayed clarification' within which an 'abundance of negatives' enacts Strether's tendency to habitual qualification, and so 'puts the reader in the right judicial frame of mind' (see note to I.I., p. 439 below). We are thus drawn into the very process of composition by which James refines his story: for his hero's speculations make the text, as he wonders how the story of others might turn out. These depend less on detective story-like deduction than upon refined impressionistic perception, as in one of James's teasing prolepses at the beginning, when he tells us (interfering in his text far more than his theory would seem to allow) that Strether's 'first walks in Europe were a kind of finely lurid intimation of what one might find at the end of that process'. However Zolaesque the promise of the 'lurid' may seem to be, it is to be subdued by the fine tenuousness of Strether's 'intimations'. We cannot hope for the crude scandal that Chad's family seem to expect, for all too soon we suspect that James's hero has a mind too fine to allow himself immediately to perceive it. This is partly because he evaluates his experience not so much in terms of the knowledge he is supposed to acquire, as in rather Paterian aesthetic terms. When he meets Chad 'his perception of the young man's identity . . . had been quite one of the sensations that most count in life', even if his

actual conversation with him leaves him with little more than 'clues' and 'clues to clues' which make him feel his 'ignorance' and what he 'didn't know'. (This is a phrase which James repeats here four times in three consecutive sentences.) He goes to bed that night 'rather bewildered'. He is in fact in that state which James thinks highly conducive to his own art: 'It seems probable that if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us' (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 63).

Strether's confusion is largely due to the peculiar indirection and hair-splitting of the things that his newly acquired Parisian friends (who are nevertheless nearly all American) tell him. The reader's pleasure thus lies very much in his or her apprehension of the inexplicit implications of what people say – subtle shifts in register, overtones, and 'subtext'. They use a code, very easily confused with James's own, in which even the commonplace or slangy phrase, such as 'a good woman' or 'all right' has to be set in a context of reticence, of polite and mannered manoeuvring into false positions. Hidden motives dictate these shifts. As Bersani remarks, James is willing to 'desubliminate social life' and to 'indicate the individual needs which the code's rhetoric obscures'; but he also enjoys 'the play of those needs along the surface of talk'.¹

Before writing *The Ambassadors*, James composed a 20,000-word 'Project of a Novel by Henry James' for submission to magazine editors; in this he says that Strether 'finds himself sinking, as I say, up to his middle in Difference – difference from what he expected, difference in Chad, difference in everything; and Difference, as I again say, is what I give' (*Notebooks*, p. 300). The word can indeed be given some of the implications that it has in deconstructive criticism. For one can say that Strether is told to approach his problem in the light of the simple moral

¹ Critical quotations are taken from the works cited in 'Further reading'.

oppositions (the innocent Chad in the hands of a 'wicked woman', the notions of being 'virtuous', 'saved', or 'lost') favoured by those who sent him. But he finds that in a world where moral distinctions or differences are multiplied, these oppositions won't work, and need to be mediated by any number of distinctions that lie between them. He comes to Paris to 'save' Chad and finds that he has already been 'saved' – in another sense. In the light of Paris, a 'Babylonian' culture vastly different from that of Woollett, Massachusetts, good and evil moral qualities cannot be so simply opposed as they are in New England. Indeed, for the observer of 'differences' they may even collapse into one another. Strether and the reader are, hardly surprisingly, being moved into a 'liberal' position in between. In arriving there Strether has to break with the puritanical and utilitarian morality of a woman who is virtually his employer rather than his fiancée (another 'difference' he has to come to appreciate). He has to move from a Victorian world of moral absolutes to a more 'modern' relativistic and pragmatic one.

In doing so he takes a distinctively Arnoldian attitude. He enjoys a 'free play of the mind on all subjects', as recommended in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1865) and elsewhere; and he attempts disinterestedness. He indeed echoes Arnold in reminding himself that he 'mustn't dispossess himself of the faculty of seeing things as they are'. But he finally arrives at a position close to that of his brother William. Henry, having read *Pragmatism: a New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* in 1907 was 'lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have (like M. Jourdain) unconsciously pragmatized' (letter of 17 October 1907).

Such a position only emerges very slowly in the novel. Some very evasive language has to be decoded, much of it lent to Strether by James, for it is not always possible to know whether the awareness we are dealing with is that of the narrator or his character. Strether opines on meeting Chad that he has been 'made over'; but what this comes to

the reader can only guess. It is yet another idiosyncratic colloquial phrase to which no clear meaning can be attached. Even as he moves to the heart of his quest, being told by Little Bilham (a young bohemian painter) that Chad's is a 'virtuous attachment', or by Madame de Vionnet to tell Mrs Newsome that she has 'been good for' Chad, he is still surrounded by ambiguities. James develops these with such virtuosity in the novel that the reader is forced with Strether to accept 'a sense of names in the air, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, a whole range of expression all about him, too thick for prompt discrimination'. Even when we think we have penetrated the secret of the plot, we are as tormented as Strether is by the finer distinctions, which are so inexplicitly articulated that the not said is as good a clue as the said. Everyone, except Strether, can rely on silence to the bitter end, so that, as far as he and Madame de Vionnet are concerned, 'It ended in fact by being quite beautiful between them, the number of things they had a manifest consciousness of not saying.'

This is not simply a matter for private self-congratulation. It is a pointer to the novel's aesthetic aims and to its intended effect on the reader. The elaborate manoeuvring of the characters into unspoken positions, so typical of James's late work, nevertheless risks reaching a pitch of obfuscation at which the reader loses patience. Indeed H. M. Alden, in composing a memorandum on James's 'Project' for the novel as submitted to Harper's, was led to say that 'The tissues of it are too subtly fine for general appreciation. It is subjective, fold within fold of a complex mental web, in which the reader is lost if his much-wearied attention falters' (*Notebooks*, p. 372). The triumph of Modernist formalism and the growth of academic study based upon it have probably increased the stamina or tolerance of readers since; and in any case most of them will I think agree that *The Ambassadors*, with its thread of a plot 'stretched quite scientifically tight' (letter of 23 December 1903) entangles the reader far less in this way than does *The Golden Bowl*.

Reticence and indirection in *The Ambassadors* may also be symptomatic on James's part of a refusal to allow 'immoral' matters to emerge from a late Victorian self-protecting euphemism. Some critics, notably Geismar, see him as subject to the 'superstition that sexual love . . . was not a source of life, but was a ludicrous, devouring and destructive process'. Although this, like Geismar's discernment of a 'sublimated homosexual situation' in the book, is maybe going too far, we might still be tempted to feel a small shock of recognition when E. M. Forster says of these characters that 'They are incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality, and of nine-tenths of heroism' and that 'their clothes will not take off', were it not for the fact that James has made his plot ultimately turn (though a little obscurely) on this very fact. The obscurity is no doubt due to James's self-proclaimed 'infinite tact and delicacy of presentation' ('Project') which, echoed in his characters, prevents Strether, obsessed though he may be by Parisian life, from grasping a commonplace of French sexual culture – that of the 'éducation sentimentale'. James was aware of Flaubert's novel, and indeed critical of it, as he was also of the French novelists' concern for the 'jeune homme sensible et distingué qui débute dans l'adultère' (letter of 23 February 1888). He found this sort of concern morally distasteful, and Strether isn't really allowed to know much about it. He may of course, like Maggie Verver, be protected by that peculiar form of 'American innocence' that can co-exist with intellectual subtlety (on the assumption that only by being innocent can you fail to see something without being accused of stupidity). The question is whether James really suffers from a form of the same inhibition. But such judgments depend upon very complicated and also, very likely, prejudiced and stereotypical cultural preconceptions. They are best left once more for the reader to decide. Certainly strong sexual attraction is implicit here, and a desire for greater explicitness in a novel of 1900 may simply reflect a voyeurism greater than James could provide for, even through the consciousness of a man who is stirred by

‘the sense that he may have a little super-sensual hour in the vicarious freedom of another’ (*Notebooks*, p. 228).

This unwillingness to define the events of plot, while characteristic of James’s method, is somewhat paradoxically and incongruously combined with another characteristic: that of self-sufficiency. For *The Ambassadors*, as the reader may by now have perceived, requires very little critical interpretation of an explanatory kind. Indeed a quite sufficient commentary on its intrigue can be found within it by the attentive reader. There is hardly any subtle exposé of character that one can propose against James’s own. (Crude Freudian allegorisation is of course another matter.) What may more plausibly concern the reader is the point of it all, and the values involved in our concern for the nuances of expression amongst a number of relatively rich, idle people, doing very little of any consequence in the world, whose purposes seem to be almost entirely controlled by their personal relationships and their aesthetic sense. (They thus truly reflect those conclusions of Moore’s contemporaneous *Principia Ethica* which were supposed to have been passed on to Forster and the Bloomsbury group.) Much here depends on Strether. He may indeed be revaluing all his values, but he is hardly doing so in any very heroic or Nietzschean sense. The book is thus better appreciated on a more modest and aesthetic scale, as an ironic comedy, clearly distinguished in this respect from its two late companions.

For Strether is a rather Prufrockian figure (if a little more flexible than his companion, described as someone ‘established in a railway carriage with a forward inclination. It represented the angle at which poor Waymarsh was to sit through the ordeal of Europe’). It is often difficult to take Strether any more seriously in his countervailing enthusiasm, as a man who ‘went to Rouen with a little handbag and inordinately spent the night’, and in *Notre Dame* ‘played his eternal nippers over Gothic glooms’. James is perhaps ambivalent here. He says of Strether, ‘I want him fine, clever, literary almost: it deepens the irony, the

tragedy' (*Notebooks*, p. 226). But he also describes him in the Preface as a Quixotic 'rueful worthy, from the very heart of New England', a 'belated man of the world'. Strether himself says that the green review he edits is his 'one presentable little scrap of an identity'. It is thus difficult to decide how inept some of his imaginings are meant to be, particularly when they focus upon women. He has the rather queenly habit of dressing them up as historical personages: he thinks that Mrs Newsome with her 'ruche' looks like Queen Elizabeth, and that Maria Gostrey is like Mary Stuart. He invests Madame de Vionnet with considerable 'Napoleonic glamour' and 'some dim lustre of the great legend'. In Notre Dame she seems 'some fine concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read' so that he has 'a kind of revelation of her heritage'. His indecision in these matters ultimately seems to be overcome by shifting her further back in history while making her more morally ambivalent. She is Cleopatra, and also Madame de Roland on her way to the scaffold. Passages like this surely have to be seen not simply as symptoms of an interaction with Europe in 'odd starts of the historic sense, suppositions and divinations with no warrant but their intensity', but also as fantasies. Strether comes close to Prufrock meditating on the mermaids in the chambers of the sea at one point: 'He could have compared her to a goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud, or to a sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge.' The combination of Woollett training and Parisian new experience does not immediately, or perhaps ever, lead to a Paterian balance. And so Strether can seem comic and mildly pathetic at the same time, bathed in the sympathetic irony provided by his narrator, as he confronts those problems which inevitably arise for him in the confrontation of youth with age, and moves toward that principled defeat and sexual withdrawal which James provides for him.

It is this confrontation indeed which James sees as the central subject and 'germ' of *The Ambassadors*, which is 'gathered up' in Strether's outburst to Little Bilham —

'Live all you can . . .'. Here he admits that he has missed the train waiting for him at the station: the young are clearly free in a way that he isn't, and his advice is that they should not 'at any rate miss things out of stupidity'. This brings the matter back not so much to a conflict of interests, as to that dangerous equation that James often seems to encourage between fine moral conduct and fine intelligence (thus Strether is ironically described as preparing to confront Sarah Pocock 'bristling with all the lucidity he had cultivated'). Or at least James brings us to a point in which moral and aesthetic discrimination interact. Indeed the growth of Strether's sympathy for Madame de Vionnet through his historical imaginings is an example. We are thus continually led back to that density of implication which I believe to be the substance of the novel . . . what it doesn't say. But these implications are not finally justified by any 'moral lesson' that the reader can draw from them.

For the moral positions in the novel, as the marvellously comic confrontation between Strether (now urging Chad to stay in Paris) and Sarah Pocock makes clear, are not unobvious. Sarah considers his conduct 'an outrage to women like us'; for her there can be no doubt of Chad's 'duty'. Her brother's 'distinction' is not, for her, to the point, any more than is his 'fortunate development'. Here a Victorian notion of duty confronts romantic self-realisation in an absurd comedy of non-communication. The liberal tide of thought, the drift from 'Victorian' to 'Modern', let alone our own more indulgent sexual morality, will put us on Chad's side at least, and so there is in a sense no large moral problem in the novel for *us*. But at this point in history there is one for James's characters, and we are supposed to enjoy the way they work it out.

It is thus the context or aesthetic frame for moral judgment – the conflict of cultures, Strether seeing Madame de Vionnet as Cleopatra, the Victorian attitude to lying, to which we must be sensitive. We need to exercise a certain historical sense, and to appreciate the way in which James has refined the 'vulgarity' of the 'dreadful little old

tradition, one of the platitudes of the human comedy, that people's moral scheme *does* break down in Paris' (Preface). We know that national cultures are relative to one another. What puts tension into the relationship for James is the fact that the New Englander's moral conscience made judgments which, because they were moral, might be thought to transcend such differences. Indeed, Sarah Pocock and the reader can both very well quit *The Ambassadors* convinced that its hero condones adultery. Thus when 'Sally Pocock' says 'I *know* Paris', she 'breathed a certain chill on Strether's ear', and ours. For through him we are supposed to know it better, as a 'vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked'.

All Strether ultimately has to oppose to Woollett judgments and values is a pragmatist's blurring of sharp edges. His state of mind and his perception of the city, cited above, hardly differ, hence his self-defence: 'I don't think there's anything I've done in any such calculated way as you describe. Everything has come as a sort of indistinguishable part of everything else.' We know how Strether arrives at this judgment, and so we are expected to endorse James's view in the Preface that 'the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision'. Since she has not read *The Ambassadors*, Sarah Pocock can be implicitly reproached for not liking her brother 'as he is', and certainly gives herself away by saying that Chad's lover isn't 'even an apology for a decent woman'. She fails to see that intellectual and emotional relations 'stop nowhere' (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 5). We on the other hand are expected to see that this novel can give them a tentative aesthetic ordering, in a 'drama of discrimination' (Preface) which can only be vitiated or arrested by Sarah Pocock's certainties. If she had her way, she would bring the novel to an end; but she departs, and leaves them to it.

It is then, Strether's impressionistic and aesthetic

apprehension, from the first 'note of Europe' through the 'deep taste of change' in Paris, that removes such simple conflicts from the centre of the reader's attention. James's aim is not to cut the Gordian knot of moral conflict but to manœuvre his characters into a final pattern of relationships. The completion of the quest, in one of those tableaux which, typically for James, combines seeing (vision) and betrayal, is thus of lesser consequence than the position Strether will then find himself in in relation to the other characters, in the 'endgame' of the novel. These moves reflect most satisfyingly Strether's apprehension of an alien culture, which 'gratifies some more distinctively disinterested, aesthetic, intellectual, social, even, so to speak, historical sense in him' ('Project'), just before it crumbles beyond the confines of the book, as Chad acquires an interest in the 'art of advertisement', Madame de Vionnet faces middle age, and Maria Gostrey's hardly but subtly expressed love for Strether goes unrequited. Strether the ambassador is thus left to his final negotiations, having some while ago realised that he represents no one but himself, and that indeed his own behaviour was at issue all along. The plot turns against him, as he remarks to Chad: 'It wasn't for you they came out, but for me. It wasn't to see for themselves what you're doing, but what I'm doing.'

The point seems to be that Strether should get nothing for himself from his experience – indeed for him it is all loss, though we may feel he is well out of a marriage with an overpowering and puritanical widow, however financially rewarding that may have been. It is this renunciation that provides the problematic moral of the tale for those who like such things.

James makes the working-out of his pattern matter to us, because it comes as the coda or aftermath to a superb climax to the story, in which he manages, by a newly specific determination of scene, to make Strether's realisation of what we have suspected all along truly revelatory. As David Lodge remarks in his brilliant analysis of this passage,

'Having committed himself completely to the idea of social beauty, Strether faces the painful truth that it is sustained by people who are human beings, with all the vulgar weaknesses of human beings.' These chapters, describing Strether by the river (XI.ii-iii) are, without the obtrusive Modernist use of this technique, one of the most impressively realised examples of stream of consciousness, and of the significance of perception within a given setting, in all literature. The frame reconciles the moral and the aesthetic; every word counts for the reader's sympathetic and amused participation in events. But any reader coming to *The Ambassadors* for the first time should not have his or her sense of discovery spoiled by anticipatory analysis of this episode. For it is the pleasure to be derived from the act of reading which is, in all that James says of this novel, revealed as his primary concern.

CHRISTOPHER BUTLER

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The Ambassadors appeared as a serial in twelve instalments in the periodical the *North American Review*, from January to December 1903 (P). The first American edition (A) was published in November 1903; it revises and supplements the P version, and restores three chapters and a few pages originally omitted. (These are four pages from: chapter v, i.e. Book II.ii; chapter xix, i.e. Book VIII.i; chapter xxviii, i.e. Book X.i; and chapter xxxv, i.e. Book XII.iv.) The P text was also independently revised and supplemented for the English edition (E) published in September 1903. When James came to make a final revision of the novel, he used the A edition as his text. It is this final text of the New York Edition (NYE), volumes XXI–XXII, published in New York and London in 1909, which is reprinted here.

The NYE perpetrated an error which James failed to notice in A: the original chapters xxviii and xxix (Book XI.i–ii) were in reverse order. This confusion was pointed out by Robert E. Young, an undergraduate at Stanford, in 1950 (see note to 353.1 below), and subsequent reprints of NYE have restored the intended chronology and interrelation of events, as does this one.

James thought that *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* needed little revision for NYE as the possessors of ‘altogether better literary manners’ than their predecessors (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 344). He nevertheless found a certain amount to do. He omitted many relative pronouns and commas, with a smoothing-out effect which still looks a little eccentric when three or four adjectives succeed one another.

He also renumbered the chapters; instead of running through the novel in single sequence, they are grouped within twelve Books. This has the advantage of allowing us to see the book as firmly structured. The action extends into a new phase at the end of the sixth Book, as Strether urges Chad to stay, and new ambassadors are sent out; and climaxes of the action come in the penultimate Books V and XI.

As one might expect, some of James’s stylistic changes are the result of a sharper perception of his characters: a ‘not very tall’ ambassador becomes ‘importantly short’ (151.12). Some revisions