

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Henry James's
The Ambassadors



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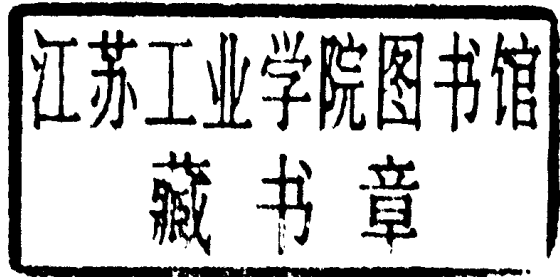
Henry James's
The Ambassadors

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Dennis Fawcett for his aid in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon the Paterian element in Strether and suggests also some of the limitations, deliberate and indeliberate, of *The Ambassadors*. Sallie Sears begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a study of "negative imagination" in James's novel, emphasizing that "James's victims share the burden of responsibility with their victimizers" in "a kind of cooperative venture in pain."

Strether's distance from actual human relationships, accepted by him "with wit and poise," is seen by Philip M. Weinstein as the origin of Strether's curious charm. Temporality in *The Ambassadors* is analyzed by Albert A. Dunn as a vision of final loss, related to the uncertainty of the future.

Ronald Wallace argues that *The Ambassadors* is James's masterpiece, both as to form and in the depth of Strether's vision. The moral vision of Strether is articulated by Martin Price with eloquent clarity: "The sternness comes of an acceptance of consciousness, with all its privileges and pains, at the expense of all else."

The American Scene, James's own meditation upon his momentary return to his native land, is usefully juxtaposed to *The Ambassadors* by Michael Seidel. In this volume's final essay, Julie Rivkin employs Jacques Derrida's deconstructive metaphor of "the supplement" to illuminate Strether's "logic" of apparent renunciation.

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Introduction

I

The intense critical admirers of Henry James go so far as to call him the major American writer, or even the most accomplished novelist in the English language. The first assertion neglects only Walt Whitman, while the second partly evades the marvelous sequence that moves from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* through Jane Austen on to George Eliot, and the alternative tradition that goes from Fielding through Dickens to Joyce. James is certainly the crucial American novelist, and in his best works the true peer of Austen and George Eliot. His precursor, Hawthorne, is more than fulfilled in the splendors of *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*, giant descendants of *The Marble Faun*, while the rival American novelists—Melville, Mark Twain, Dreiser, Faulkner—survive comparison with James only by being so totally unlike him. Unlikeness makes Faulkner—particularly in his great phase—a true if momentary rival, and perhaps if you are to find a non-Jamesian sense of sustained power in the American novel, you need to seek out our curious antithetical tradition that moves between *Moby-Dick* and its darker descendants: *As I Lay Dying*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *The Crying of Lot 49*. The normative consciousness of our prose fiction, first prophesied by *The Scarlet Letter*, was forged by Henry James, whose spirit lingers not only in palpable disciples like Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence* and Willa Cather in her superb *A Lost Lady*, but more subtly (because merged with Joseph Conrad's aura) in novelists as various as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Warren. It seems clear that the relation of James to American prose fiction is precisely analogous to Whitman's relation to our poetry; each is, in his own sphere, what

Emerson prophesied as the Central Man who would come and change all things forever, in a celebration of the American Newness.

The irony of James's central position among our novelists is palpable, since, like the much smaller figure of T. S. Eliot later on, James abandoned his nation and eventually became a British subject, after having been born a citizen in Emerson's America. But it is a useful commonplace of criticism that James remained the most American of novelists, not less peculiarly nationalistic in *The Ambassadors* than he had been in "Daisy Miller" and *The American*. James, a subtle if at times perverse literary critic, understood very well what we continue to learn and relearn; an American writer can be Emersonian or anti-Emersonian, but even a negative stance towards Emerson always leads back again to his formulation of the post-Christian American religion of *Self-Reliance*. Overt Emersonians like Thoreau, Whitman, and Frost are no more pervaded by the Sage of Concord than are anti-Emersonians like Hawthorne, Melville, and Eliot. Perhaps the most haunted are those writers who evade Emerson, yet never leave his dialectical ambience, a group that includes Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and Wallace Stevens.

Emerson was for Henry James something of a family tradition, though that in itself hardly accounts for the plain failure of very nearly everything that the novelist wrote about the essayist. James invariably resorts to a tone of ironic indulgence on the subject of Emerson, which is hardly appropriate to the American prophet of Power, Fate, Illusion, and Wealth. I suggest that James unknowingly mixed Emerson up with the sage's good friend Henry James, Sr., whom we dismiss as a Swedenborgian, but who might better be characterized as an American Gnostic speculator, in Emerson's mode, though closer in eminence to, say, Bronson Alcott than to the author of *The Conduct of Life*.

The sane and sacred Emerson was a master of evasions, particularly when disciples became too pressing, whether upon personal or spiritual matters. The senior Henry James is remembered now for having fathered Henry, William, and Alice, and also for his famous outburst against Emerson, whom he admired on the other side of idolatry: "O you man without a handle!"

The junior Henry James, overtly celebrating Emerson, nevertheless remarked: "It is hardly too much, or too little, to say of Emerson's writings in general that they were not composed at all."

“Composed” is the crucial word there, and makes me remember a beautiful moment in Stevens’s “The Poems of Our Climate”:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.

Emerson’s mind, never merely restless, indeed was never-resting, as was the mind of every member of the James family. The writings of Emerson, not composed at all, constantly come back to what had been so long composed, to what his admirer Nietzsche called the primordial poem of mankind, the fiction that we have knocked together and called our cosmos. James was far too subtle not to have known this. He chose not to know it, because he needed a provincial Emerson even as he needed a provincial Hawthorne, just as he needed a New England that never was: simple, gentle, and isolated, even a little childlike.

The days when T. S. Eliot could wonder why Henry James had not carved up R. W. Emerson seem safely past, but we ought to remember Eliot’s odd complaint about James as critic: “Even in handling men whom he could, one supposes, have carved joint from joint—Emerson or Norton—his touch is uncertain; there is a desire to be generous, a political motive, an admission (in dealing with American writers) that under the circumstances this was the best possible, or that it has fine qualities.” Aside from appearing to rank Emerson with Charles Eliot Norton (which is comparable to ranking Freud with Bernard Berenson), this unamiable judgment reduces Emerson, who was and is merely the mind of America, to the stature of a figure who might, at most, warrant the condescension of James (and of Eliot). The cultural polemic involved in Eliot is obvious—indeed, obsessive—and, though pleasanter in James, is really not acceptable.

Of the three periods into which his life divides itself, the first was (as in the case of most men) that of movement, experiment and selection—that of effort too and painful probation. Emerson had his message, but he was a good while looking for his form—the form which, as he himself would have said, he never completely found and of which it was rather characteristic of him that his later years (with their growing refusal to give him the *word*), wishing to

attack him in his most vulnerable point, where his tenure was least complete, had in some degree the effect of despoiling him. It all sounds rather bare and stern, Mr. Cabot's account of his youth and early manhood, and we get an impression of a terrible paucity of alternatives. If he would be neither a farmer nor a trader he could "teach school"; that was the main resource and a part of the general educative process of the young New Englander who proposed to devote himself to the things of the mind. There was an advantage in the nudity, however, which was that, in Emerson's case at least, the things of the mind did get themselves admirably well considered. If it be his great distinction and his special sign that he had a more vivid conception of the moral life than any one else, it is probably not fanciful to say that he owed it in part to the limited way in which he saw our capacity for living illustrated. The plain, God-fearing, practical society which surrounded him was not fertile in variations: it had great intelligence and energy, but it moved altogether in the straightforward direction. On three occasions later—three journeys to Europe—he was introduced to a more complicated world; but his spirit, his moral taste, as it were, abode always within the undecorated walls of his youth. There he could dwell with that ripe unconsciousness of evil which is one of the most beautiful signs by which we know him. His early writings are full of quaint animadversion upon the vices of the place and time, but there is something charmingly vague, light and general in the arraignment. Almost the worst he can say is that these vices are negative and that his fellow-townsmen are not heroic. We feel that his first impressions were gathered in a community from which misery and extravagance, and either extreme, of any sort, were equally absent. What the life of New England fifty years ago offered to the observer was the common lot, in a kind of achromatic picture, without particular intensifications. It was from this table of the usual, the merely typical joys and sorrows that he proceeded to generalise—a fact that accounts in some degree for a certain inadequacy and thinness in his enumerations. But it helps to account also for his direct,

intimate vision of the soul itself—not in its emotions, its contortions and perversions, but in its passive, exposed, yet healthy form. He knows the nature of man and the long tradition of its dangers; but we feel that whereas he can put his finger on the remedies, lying for the most part, as they do, in the deep recesses of virtue, of the spirit, he has only a kind of hearsay, uninformed acquaintance with the disorders. It would require some ingenuity, the reader may say too much, to trace closely this correspondence between his genius and the frugal, dutiful, happy but decidedly lean Boston of the past, where there was a great deal of will but very little fulcrum—like a ministry without an opposition.

The genius itself it seems to me impossible to contest—I mean the genius for seeing character as a real and supreme thing. Other writers have arrived at a more complete expression: Wordsworth and Goethe, for instance, give one a sense of having found their form, whereas with Emerson we never lose the sense that he is still seeking it. But no one has had so steady and constant, and above all so natural, a vision of what we require and what we are capable of in the way of aspiration and independence. With Emerson it is ever the special capacity for moral experience—always that and only that. We have the impression, somehow, that life had never bribed him to look at anything but the soul; and indeed in the world in which he grew up and lived the bribes and lures, the beguilements and prizes, were few. He was in an admirable position for showing, what he constantly endeavoured to show, that the prize was within. Any one who in New England at that time could do that was sure of success, of listeners and sympathy: most of all, of course, when it was a question of doing it with such a divine persuasiveness. Moreover, the way in which Emerson did it added to the charm—by word of mouth, face to face, with a rare, irresistible voice and a beautiful mild, modest authority. If Mr. Arnold is struck with the limited degree in which he was a man of letters I suppose it is because he is more struck with his having been, as it were, a man of lectures. But the lecture surely was never more purged of its grossness—the quality

in it that suggests a strong light and a big brush—than as it issued from Emerson’s lips; so far from being a vulgarisation, it was simply the esoteric made audible, and instead of treating the few as the many, after the usual fashion of gentlemen on platforms, he treated the many as the few. There was probably no other society at that time in which he would have got so many persons to understand that; for we think the better of his audience as we read him, and wonder where else people would have had so much moral attention to give. It is to be remembered however that during the winter of 1847–48, on the occasion of his second visit to England, he found many listeners in London and in provincial cities. Mr. Cabot’s volumes are full of evidence of the satisfactions he offered, the delights and revelations he may be said to have promised, to a race which had to seek its entertainment, its rewards, and consolations, almost exclusively in the moral world. But his own writings are fuller still; we find an instance almost wherever we open them.

It is astonishing to me that James judged Emerson’s “great distinction” and “special sign” to be “that he had a more vivid conception of the moral life than any one else,” unless “the moral life” has an altogether Jamesian meaning. I would rather say that the great distinction and special sign of James’s fiction is that it represents a more vivid conception of the moral life than even Jane Austen or George Eliot could convey to us. Emerson is not much more concerned with morals than he is with manners; his subjects are power, freedom, and fate. As for “that ripe unconsciousness of evil” that James found in Emerson, I have not been able to find it myself, after reading Emerson almost daily for the last twenty years, and I am reminded of Yeats’s late essay on Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Yeats declares that his skeptical and passionate precursor, great poet that he certainly was, necessarily lacked the Vision of Evil. The necessity in both strong misreadings, James’s and Yeats’s, was to clear more space for themselves.

Jealous as I am for Emerson, I can recognize that no critic has matched James in seeing and saying what Emerson’s strongest virtue is: “But no one has had so steady and constant, and above all so natural, a vision of what we require and what we are capable of in the

way of aspiration and independence.” No one, that is, except Henry James, for that surely is the quest of Isabel Archer towards her own quite Emersonian vision of aspiration and independence. “The moral world” is James’s phrase and James’s emphasis. Emerson’s own emphasis, I suspect, was considerably more pragmatic than that of James. When James returned to America in 1904 on a visit, after twenty years of self-exile, he went back to Concord and recorded his impressions in *The American Scene*:

It is odd, and it is also exquisite, that these witnessing ways should be the last ground on which we feel moved to ponderation of the “Concord school”—to use, I admit, a futile expression; or rather, I should doubtless say, it *would* be odd if there were not inevitably something absolute in the fact of Emerson’s all but lifelong connection with them. We may smile a little as we “drag in” Weimar, but I confess myself, for my part, much more satisfied than not by our happy equivalent, “in American money,” for Goethe and Schiller. The money is a potful in the second case as in the first, and if Goethe, in the one, represents the gold and Schiller the silver, I find (and quite putting aside any bimetallic prejudice) the same good relation in the other between Emerson and Thoreau. I open Emerson for the same benefit for which I open Goethe, the sense of moving in large intellectual space, and that of the gush, here and there, out of the rock, of the crystalline cupful, in wisdom and poetry, in *Wahrheit* and *Dichtung*; and whatever I open Thoreau for (I needn’t take space here for the good reasons) I open him oftener than I open Schiller. Which comes back to our feeling that the rarity of Emerson’s genius, which has made him so, for the attentive peoples, the first, and the one really rare, American spirit in letters, couldn’t have spent his career in a charming woody, watery place, for so long socially and typically and, above all, interestingly homogeneous, without an effect as of the communication to it of something ineffaceable. It was during his long span his immediate concrete, sufficient world; it gave him his nearest vision of life, and he drew half his images, we recognize, from the revolution of its seasons and the play of its manners. I don’t speak of

the other half, which he drew from elsewhere. It is admirably, to-day, as if we were still seeing these things *in* those images, which stir the air like birds, dim in the eventide, coming home to nest. If one had reached a "time of life" one had thereby at least heard him lecture; and not a russet leaf fell for me, while I was there, but fell with an Emersonian drop.

That is a beautiful study of the nostalgias and tells us, *contra* T. S. Eliot, what James's relation to Emerson actually was. We know how much that is essential in William James was quarried out of Emerson, particularly from the essay "Experience," which gave birth to Pragmatism. Henry James was not less indebted to Emerson than William James was. *The Portrait of a Lady* is hardly an Emersonian novel; perhaps *The Scarlet Letter* is closer to that. Yet Isabel Archer is Emerson's daughter, just as Lambert Strether is Emerson's heir. The Emersonian aura also lingers on even in the ghostly tales of Henry James.

II

James thought *The Ambassadors* was the best of all his novels. I myself prefer not only *The Portrait of A Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*, but even *The Bostonians*, upon the simple test of rereading. All of the novelistic virtues that critics have found in *The Ambassadors* are certainly there, but they are rather too overtly there. The novel is a beautiful pattern and a model of artistic control, but is Strether of the company of Isabel Archer and Milly Theale? He is intended to be, in the best sense, James's *Portrait of a Gentleman*. Every good reader admires him and finds him sympathetic, yet across the years he comes to seem less and less memorable. I suspect that is because he does not give us enough grief; his story is not painful to us, whereas Isabel's is. Isabel, Emersonian and Paterian, nevertheless has in her the force of the Protestant will in its earlier intensity, almost the force of Dorothea Brooke, though not of their common ancestress, Clarissa Harlowe. But Lewis Lambert Strether is denied any field in which the will might be exercised heroically, since James will not even let him fall in love, except perhaps with the rather too symbolic or idealized Madame de Vionnet.

Everything in the art of Henry James is sublimely deliberate, which means that the imbalance between the matter and the manner of *The Ambassadors* is James's peculiar mode of taking those ultimate risks that alone allow him to make distinctions and achieve distinction. Strether's mission is to rescue Chad from Madame de Vionnet, but is Chad worth rescuing? The best thing about Chad is that he becomes Horatio to Strether's Hamlet, and so serves as the reader's surrogate for appreciating Strether. However, Horatio floats about the court of Elsinore as a kind of privileged outsider, and his splendid destiny is to survive as the teller of Hamlet's story. Chad will go back to Woollett and enthusiastically pioneer in the art of advertising so as to raise the Newsome domestic device to undreamed-of heights of use and profit. The irony of irony is all very well in high romance or in High Romanticism, but not even the comic sense of Henry James quite saves *The Ambassadors* from a certain readerly listlessness that follows Strether's terminal "Then there we are!" to the endlessly receptive Maria Gostrey.

James is perfectly ruthless in his application of what has come to be the Formalist principle that subject matter in literary art is precisely what does not matter. The *Iliad* after all, from any ironic perspective, like that of Shakespeare's more than mordant *Troilus and Cressida*, has as its matter the quarrels between brawny and vainglorious chieftains over the possession of the whore Helen, or of this or that despoiled captive woman. That is not Homer's *Iliad*, nor is *The Ambassadors* the story of the education of Lambert Strether, until at last he can warn little Bilham (one wearies of the "little"!) that life's meaning is that we must *live*. *Seeing* is living, for Strether, as for James, as for Carlyle, for Ruskin, for Emerson, for Pater.

"Impressionism," as a literary term, is not very useful, since even Pater is not an Impressionist in a painterly sense. What Strether *sees* is simply what is there, and what is there would appear to be loss, very much in Pater's sense of loss. James's aesthetic has its differences from Pater's, but I am not so certain that Strether's vision and Pater's are easily to be distinguished from one another. When Strether experiences his crisis (or epiphany) in Gloriani's garden, we are in the cosmos of Pater and of Nietzsche, in which life can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Strether has just met Madame de Vionnet for the first time: "She was dressed in black, but in black that struck him as light and transparent; she was exceedingly fair, and, though she was as markedly slim, her face had a roundness,

with eyes far apart and a little strange.” Perhaps that is love at first sight, and certainly Madame de Vionnet is herself the epiphany. “In black that struck him as light and transparent” would have alerted any Emersonian or Paterian, and this is the prelude to the central paragraph of *The Ambassadors*, Strether’s famous address to little Bilham:

“It’s not too late for *you*, on any side, and you don’t strike me as in danger of missing the train; besides which people can be in general pretty well trusted, of course—with the clock of their freedom ticking as loud as it seems to do here—to keep an eye on the fleeting hour. All the same don’t forget that you’re young—blessedly young; be glad of it on the contrary and live up to it. Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven’t had that what *have* you had? This place and these impressions—mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I’ve seen at *his* place—well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped *that* into my mind. I see it now. I haven’t done so enough before—and now I’m old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I *do* see, at least; and more than you’d believe or I can express. It’s too late. And it’s as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there. Now I hear its faint receding whistle miles and miles down the line. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me; for it’s at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one’s consciousness is poured—so that one ‘takes’ the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it: one lives in fine as one can. Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don’t be, like me, without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it; I don’t quite know which. Of course at present I’m a case of reaction against the mistake; and the voice of reaction should, no doubt,

always be taken with an allowance. But that doesn't affect the point that the right time is now yours. The right time is *any* time that one is still so lucky as to have. You've plenty; that's the great thing; you're, as I say, damn you, so happily and hatefully young. Don't at any rate miss things out of stupidity. Of course I don't take you for a fool, or I shouldn't be addressing you thus awfully. Do what you like so long as you don't make *my* mistake. For it was a mistake. Live!" . . . Slowly and sociably, with full pauses and straight dashes, Strether had so delivered himself; holding little Bilham from step to step deeply and gravely attentive. The end of all was that the young man had turned quite solemn, and that this was a contradiction of the innocent gaiety the speaker had wished to promote. He watched for a moment the consequence of his words, and then, laying a hand on his listener's knee and as if to end with the proper joke: "And now for the eye I shall keep on you!"

The loud ticking of the clock of freedom is Strether's version of Pater's "We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more," itself a Paterian commentary upon Victor Hugo's "We are all condemned men, with a kind of indefinite reprieve." Pater's question is how are we to spend that interval, and his answer is in perception and sensation as memorialized by art. Strether is not a questioner because Pater is a theoretician of seeing, but Strether *does* see, indeed always has seen, but was too morally intelligent to have had the illusion of freedom at the right time. And yet: "The right time is *any* time that one is still so lucky as to have." James calls Strether elderly, at fifty-five, but even in 1903 that was not necessarily elderly. Strether, like Pater's Mona Lisa, is older than the rocks among which he sits, or he is like Nietzsche's Emerson: "He does not know how old he is already, or how young he is still going to be." James's way of expressing that Nietzschean paradox has less wit but more American pragmatism. Strether, like Emerson, is a man of imagination who achieves "an amount of experience out of any proportion to his adventures." There truly is no past for Strether; he is an intuitive Emersonian who knows that there is no history, only biography. Strether has seen in Madame de Vionnet what Pater saw in Leonardo's Lady Lisa (I owe this insight to F. O. Matthiessen): a