

Henry James in – and out of – the Classroom

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Henry James did not write for the classroom. His personal experience of the institution was erratic at best, and most of his work was published at a time when the novel had yet to be formally recognized as a subject of academic study. But he believed strongly that “art lives upon discussion,” and the undergraduate classroom can be an invigorating space in which to keep that discussion going. Drawing both on my own experience of teaching James’s novels over the years and on an informal survey of Yale undergraduates who have studied the novelist with me in recent decades, this essay addresses some of the ways in which his work continues to resonate both in and out of the classroom.

I have been teaching and writing about Henry James for half a century, but it was only the other day that I realized how closely I associate him with the classroom. I was a bookish child who spent much of her adolescence consuming nineteenth-century novels indiscriminately with twentieth-century best-sellers, but while I have vivid memories of weeping over *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and impressing adults with my capacity to read all of *War and Peace*, I do not recall encountering James until my sophomore year in college, when a course on the English novel introduced me to both *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880 – 1881) and *The Ambassadors* (1903). I must have been drawn to the late James even then, since I also recall writing a paper on the latter novel, though what I chiefly remember about that exercise is a gentle suggestion from the instructor that I was not as clear as I might have been about what exactly its innocent protagonist, Lambert Strether, discovers in the climactic episode. The document in question is no longer available, but I strongly suspect that I was hedging my bets: between James’s obliquity and my own innocence at the time, I am not sure I was ready to say explicitly that the “virtuous attachment” in which Strether so wished to believe proves an adulterous relation after all, a discovery whose sublime comedy is now among my favorite moments in the novels. Like many of James’s protagonists, in other words, I was good at not quite knowing what I actually knew, though it was not until I read *The Golden Bowl* for the first time in graduate school that I succumbed completely to the excitement of following his characters as they negotiate between their de-

sire for knowledge and their terror of it. I had arrived at Yale vaguely imagining that I might write a dissertation on the poetry of W. H. Auden; I left having written on the style of James's major late novels. That, in turn, became both the subject of my first book and the endpoint of a series of courses I have been teaching ever since.

Not that James himself ever wrote for the classroom. His own experience of the institution was, to say the least, erratic: the offspring of a restless father, who believed in a liberal education but was perpetually dissatisfied with the usual means of providing it, the young Henry endured "small vague spasms of school," as he charmingly put it in his autobiography, punctuated by a sequence of tutors and extended periods of travel back and forth across the Atlantic.¹ Though his older brother William would dip in and out of German universities before eventually earning a medical degree from Harvard and settling down to teach there for over thirty years, Henry's sole attempt at a university education was an abortive year at Harvard Law School: "proceeding to Cambridge," in his words, "on the very vaguest grounds that probably ever determined a residence there," only to spend most of his time in an effort "to woo the muse . . . of prose fiction."²

Unlike James Joyce, who famously quipped to his French translator that *Ulysses* would "keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality," James never seems to have imagined that literary success might be determined by becoming the province of academics.³ Doubtless the difference was partly generational: though English literature had begun to be accepted as a university subject by the mid-nineteenth century, modern works, including novels, took far longer to enter the curriculum; and James, who was born almost forty years before Joyce, had been publishing fiction for more than two decades before American professors controversially began to offer university courses on the subject in the early 1890s.⁴ James's efforts to elevate the status of the novel may have contributed to a split between elite and popular fiction that sometimes appears to have culminated, among other things, in works deliberately aimed at the college syllabus, but James himself never abandoned the hope of appealing to a wide audience.⁵ Even while composing the Prefaces to the so-called New York Edition of his works (1907–1909), whose meditations on point of view and narrative form would later help inaugurate the austere-named discipline of narratology, he retained the wishful expectation of "their perhaps helping the Edition to sell two or three copies more!"⁶

But if there is no reason to think that James wrote for the classroom, there is abundant reason to think that vigorous discussion was for him the very lifeblood of the novel. "Discussion, suggestion, formulation, these things are fertilising when they are frank and sincere," he proclaimed in his influential essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884); and one of the principal complaints he lodged in that essay against the tradition he had inherited was that, until very recently, "the English

novel was not what the French call *discutable*.”⁷ James’s brief bilingualism is a useful reminder that the Anglo-American association of literary theory with France has a long history, though he was probably thinking more immediately of his own experience as a young writer nearly a decade earlier, when he had spent a formative year in Paris socializing with a group of prominent novelists and other intellectuals who gathered in Gustave Flaubert’s apartment. “They are all charming talkers,” James had written to William Dean Howells of his new company: a group that included Ivan Turgenev, Edmond de Goncourt, Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, and Alphonse Daudet, as well as, of course, Flaubert himself.⁸ James, who was thirty-two at the time, had already published two novels and was working on a third, but by comparison with the members of Flaubert’s circle, he was something of a *naïf*, to adopt another word he used in “The Art of Fiction”: both eager to soak in their worldly wisdom and repelled by what often seemed to him their coarseness and vulgarity.⁹ As the literary scholar Peter Brooks has shown, it took James several decades to assimilate his Parisian education: a not uncommon reaction, perhaps, even for those whose schooling takes less heady forms than hanging out in Flaubert’s apartment.¹⁰ By the winter of 1876, the experiment had run its course, and the year concluded with a permanent move to London.

Yet James’s belief that “art lives upon discussion” long outlasted his decision to quit his informal seminar in French fiction, as even a casual reader of his letters – let alone his criticism and Prefaces – would recognize.¹¹ Throughout his career, he engaged in a conversation with fellow novelists and the public alike about the potential of his chosen form, a conversation less systematic but perhaps more lively than his subsequent reputation would sometimes suggest. When I am teaching *The American* (1876 – 1877), for example, I cannot resist introducing students to his extended back-and-forth with Howells over the novel’s ending: a debate obviously shaped by Howells’s position as editor of *The Atlantic*, where the work was then being serialized, but also by the latter’s own reactions to the unfolding narrative. Though we lack Howells’s side of the correspondence, it is clear that he both wanted and expected the novel to conclude with a marriage between its wealthy American hero and its aristocratic French heroine, and that James’s determination to resist that prospect had finally more to do with his feeling for “the tragedies in life” – the phrase is James’s – than with the arguments with which he tried to placate his friend. To Howells, however, he chose to defend his plot on the grounds of verisimilitude. “They would have been an impossible couple, with an impossible problem before them,” he protested, half-facetiously:

For instance – to speak very materially – where could they have lived? It was all very well for Newman to talk of giving her the whole world to choose from: but Asia & Africa being counted out, what would Europe & America have offered? *Mme de Cintré* couldn’t have lived in New York; depend upon it; & Newman, after his marriage (or

rather *she*, after it) couldn't have dwelt in France. There would have been nothing left but a farm out West.¹²

Yet whether he was exchanging literary ideas with friends like Howells, reviewing his contemporaries, both famous and otherwise – the list ranges from Flaubert and George Eliot to the long forgotten Henry Kingsley – or composing memorials to such distinguished predecessors as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Honoré de Balzac, James was also engaged in a lifelong dialogue with himself; and by the time he came to revise *The American* for the New York Edition thirty years later, what he saw in the ending was not a testament to realism but a peculiar form of wish-fulfillment. Rather than reject Newman as too vulgar, his creator now concluded, a family of impecunious French aristocrats would have jumped at the opportunity to acquire the American's wealth. The youthful novelist had been so determined that his hero "be ill-used," he belatedly realized, that he had managed to overlook the more plausible outcome and ended by "plotting arch-romance without knowing it."¹³

For the older James, that discovery in turn precipitated one of his best-known theoretical formulas, a distinction between "the real" and "the romantic" that he elaborated in the novel's Preface and that continues to influence many accounts of nineteenth-century fiction, my own included.¹⁴ For my students, James's distinction also continues to serve as a touchstone for conversation, as we work our way through a selection of his novels over the course of a semester. A contemporary classroom can hardly hope to replicate a writer's lifelong exchanges with self and others, but I like to think it can go a little way to keeping them going. In what follows, I want to give a brief account of such talk as I have experienced it over the years, focusing especially on an undergraduate seminar that I have taught with some frequency in the new millennium. That class has been among the highlights of my intellectual life, and it is a tribute to the students as much as to James himself that I have found it so exhilarating.

First, however, some crucial disclaimers are in order. I have chosen to focus on the undergraduate rather than graduate classroom both because undergraduates have less professional stake in their reading and because courses on a single writer have become comparatively uncommon in the graduate curriculum. There are a number of reasons for this, ranging from the skepticism about individual authorship promulgated by some literary theorists in the 1980s and 1990s to the opening up of the canon that has made an entire semester – or critical book – devoted to one figure seem excessively narrow. Of course, the classes still exist, as do the books: indeed, the conventional wisdom that publishers no longer want such works is somewhat belied by the roughly ninety critical or biographical studies of James alone, by my count, that have appeared in multiple languages since the turn of the present century, and that is without including new editions

and collections of his works, both fictional and nonfictional, or the thirteen volumes thus far available of over forty projected in an ongoing edition of his complete surviving letters. I myself last taught a (small) graduate seminar on James and narrative theory a half-dozen years ago, though I am more likely to include him among several writers in graduate courses on broader themes or theoretical questions: *The Portrait of a Lady* and some of his art criticism in a seminar on visual portraiture and literary character, for instance, or *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) in a class devoted to the representation of consciousness in third-person narrative from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf. After more than a century of critical writing on Henry James, it can seem very hard – if not impossible – to say anything new; and for doctoral students anxious to make their distinctive marks on the intellectual world, let alone to find employment in an extremely straitened market, the opportunity to live for an extended time with the mind of a single author increasingly looks like an unaffordable luxury.

Happily, undergraduates do not suffer from the same constraints, and that remains true even if they later decide to pursue advanced work in their turn. Much as I would like to think otherwise, however, I cannot pretend that those who end up in the James class therefore speak for the common reader, assuming that mythical creature can even be said to exist. Yale is a highly selective institution, with a tradition of attracting students particularly drawn to the humanities, and the majority of those who enroll in the seminar are English majors, who arrive in the class with at least some expectation that reading James will be worth the effort. This is not to say that they always know what they are getting into: though they have often encountered a short work or two – *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is a particular favorite – and some have already read *The Portrait of a Lady*, whether for school or for pleasure, prior experience with the late fiction is understandably rare; and it is not uncommon for students to take the course simply because they have heard, by one means or another, that they should read some James before they graduate. Yale is also unusual, as far as I know, in the emphasis it continues to place on the study of poetry, and among the most responsive readers of James I have encountered over the years have been students with little formal training in the novel but considerable experience analyzing – and writing – poems. I vividly recall one such student who told me that the only thing he knew about James before signing up for the course was that poets he admired, like T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore, in turn admired the novelist. It is probably also relevant that a growing number of our students are would-be writers enrolled in a program premised on the belief that the craft to which they aspire is primarily learned through extensive reading. That, of course, is how James himself became a novelist, and while the fact that our writing concentrators, as we call them, are also expected to complete the regular requirements of the English major may help to account for their presence in the class, the resulting mix feels especially appropriate for a writer who comment-

ed so abundantly on his own practice. That he often did so by addressing both ordinary readers and fellow novelists means that he speaks to such students with a particular resonance.

Conscious of the challenge that James's late style can pose even for sophisticated readers, I always begin the first meeting by urging everyone to try a page or two of his Preface (1909) to *The Golden Bowl* before finally signing up for the course. ("Among many matters thrown into relief by a refreshed acquaintance with 'The Golden Bowl,'" the opening sentence reads, "what perhaps most stands out for me is the still marked inveteracy of a certain indirect and oblique view of my presented action; unless indeed I make up my mind to call this mode of treatment, on the contrary, any superficial appearance notwithstanding, the very straightest and closest possible.")¹⁵ Though I love the late work, I tell the students, they are not required to follow suit: indeed, it is perfectly acceptable to view the mid-career *Portrait of a Lady* as the summit of James's achievement and to regard his later novels as appealing to a more specialized taste. But what I do ask is that they be willing to tackle the difficulties and at least try to imagine why people like me find the exercise so exhilarating. I do not know how many potential students this warning discourages – though I can recall a few who confessed to backing out as a consequence – but I think its principal effect is to make those who stay feel proud of themselves for doing so and more committed to the collective project. When we finally arrive at *The Golden Bowl*, I urge them to play Colonel Bob as much as they like, an invitation to which they usually respond with nervous laughter, since it means modeling themselves on that novel's chief skeptic, Bob Assingham, who characteristically cuts through his wife's tortured syntax by asking bluntly what it all amounts to. ("But what the deuce did they *do*?" he inquires at one point, after she offers a particularly evasive account of the future adulterers' previous romantic history.)¹⁶ Behind my advice lies the hope that the group will likewise imitate Colonel Bob in eventually learning to appreciate the value, both moral and aesthetic, of Jamesian obliquity; but for readers just beginning the novel, clarifying what's at stake clearly takes precedence. I also make a point of telling the class that there are sentences in *The Golden Bowl* – and in the late James more generally – of whose meaning I still remain uncertain, despite having edited the text for Penguin about a decade ago. This is the simple truth, but knowing they are not alone also encourages students to seek help when they find themselves baffled. James is mysterious enough without mystifying him further.

He was also prolific enough to overwhelm the best efforts of a syllabus-maker, even one willing to assign a lot of reading. In addition to twenty novels and more than a dozen plays, there are over one hundred short stories, multiple volumes of literary essays, art criticism, and travel writing, including the book-length account of his late return to his native land, *The American Scene*

(1907), a commissioned biography of the American sculptor, *William Wetmore Story* (1903), and two haunting works of autobiography: *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). And that is not to mention two novels and a third volume of autobiography left unfinished at the time of his death, or the vast amount of writing he never intended for public eyes, like his letters and notebooks. (The last of these, first published in 1947, is a book I always recommend to the aspiring writers in the class, as well as to anyone curious as to how James arrived at his plots or decided, for example, what names to bestow on his large cast of characters.) As I usually observe on the first day, choosing among these possibilities for a single course bears some resemblance to the activity in which James himself engaged when deciding what to include in his New York Edition: a process that was governed in his case not merely by retrospective judgments of quality – in one baffling decision, he dismissed *Washington Square* (1880) on the grounds that he could not bear to reread it – but by practical considerations like the costs of negotiating copyright with different publishers or the question of how many stories would fit in a single volume.¹⁷ Which novels to teach is also a question of length and availability, as well as the history one is hoping to tell. I have never felt tempted by *Watch and Ward* (1871), a rather queasy-making novel about a man who ends up marrying the orphan he adopted when she was a girl, but it was not until 1983 that a reliable text was even in print. James’s disowning of this early effort was so complete that he not only excluded it from the New York Edition but introduced that opus by characterizing *Roderick Hudson* (1875), published four years later, as “my first attempt at a novel.”¹⁸

My courses on James usually follow his lead, beginning with *Roderick Hudson* and concluding with *The Golden Bowl*, a trajectory that helps students see how James reworks certain patterns again and again, even as it also traces a particular story about his development as a novelist. *Roderick Hudson* opens with a wealthy American, Rowland Mallett, who idly plans to help some native city establish an art museum by going on a collecting tour of Europe and who impulsively decides to bankroll a promising young sculptor’s aesthetic education in Italy instead; *The Golden Bowl* begins with a penniless Italian prince on the brink of marriage to an American heiress whose fabulously wealthy father has been collecting art for just such a museum as Rowland contemplates in a place baldly dubbed “American City.”¹⁹ With the partial exceptions of *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and *What Maisie Knew*, both primarily set in England but with protagonists who take crucial journeys to the Continent, the other novels on this syllabus are likewise variations on what’s become known as James’s international theme: *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Ambassadors*. More important, perhaps, is how this sequence enables students to follow James as he continually rewrites his earlier work, whether by reviving the charismatic Christina Light of *Roderick Hudson* in the eponymous heroine of *The Princess Casamassima*, or by returning to particular

character types and situations and radically transforming them, as when the out-worn affair between Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady* becomes the sympathetically imagined and erotically charged – if morally problematic – adultery of *The Golden Bowl*.

Before settling on this syllabus, I briefly experimented with another format, a course on James and the movies that focused less on his reworking of certain themes than on the potential and limits of his medium. The idea was to ask what novels could do that films could not – and vice versa – and the choice of texts for the course was necessarily constrained by the prior choices of the filmmakers. When I last taught the class in 2004, the list included *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians* (1886), *The Turn of the Screw*, and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), each of which had inspired one or more cinematic versions in the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most interesting case from a film buff's point of view was François Truffaut's *The Green Room* (1978), a very loose riff on several James tales, *The Altar of the Dead* (1895) most prominently among them, updated to France in the aftermath of World War I. I had initially designed the course in the hope of attracting students who might not otherwise be drawn to James, but the results of the experiment were rather mixed, perhaps because it was hard to make the materials cohere or because my own ambivalence about some of the films was catching. As is often the case in my experience, the best films were either those that had comparatively simple material with which to work – like *The Innocents* (1961), Jack Clayton's adaptation of James's "shameless pot-boiler" *The Turn of the Screw*²⁰ – or those that took the greatest liberties with their source texts, like the Truffaut.

James is an intensely visual writer, but he is also of course an elaborately verbal one, and films struggle to get the balance right. Despite a script that adheres quite closely to the original, for example, Jane Campion's *Portrait of a Lady* (1996) repeatedly feels off to me, not least when John Malkovich's over-the-top performance as Gilbert Osmond turns psychological abuse into overt physical violence, a possibility the novel explicitly rules out. The clumsy dialogue in Iain Softley's adaptation of *The Wings of the Dove* (1997), by contrast, owes virtually nothing to James, and, like Campion, Softley literalizes the action: in his case by dramatizing a sex scene that the novel leaves implicit. But somewhat to my surprise, I often found myself admiring the film's visual effects, especially the skill with which the actors and cinematographers translated the novel's triangular erotic relations into a subtle language of glance and gesture.²¹ It is not clear that I persuaded others on this point, however; and after the second iteration of the course, a few students complained that we were wasting our time with inferior examples of cinematic art. Though I have often suspected that stringent verdict emanated from a handful of film studies majors in the group – their remarks were anonymous – the solution seemed obvious. Henceforth, the novels would have to stand on their own.

Immediate responses to a class are one thing, subsequent memories, another. In preparation for this essay, I tried something I had never done before: writing to former students to ask what afterthoughts they might be willing to share about their semester with James. Did they ever think about the novels they read? Continue to read or reread him? Did encountering him have any effect on their subsequent literary or artistic tastes? Their careers or lives more generally? While I anticipated that some would have gone on to academic or literary work, I also expressed my eagerness to hear from those whose current lives had less obvious Jamesian reverberations. Nor did I only ask for affirmative responses: it is possible, I suggested, that his fiction feels dated now in a way it did not then, or that they had always harbored reservations about the novelist that had only grown over the years. Between the two versions of the course, I had taught almost one hundred students since the beginning of the present century, but I could only find email addresses for sixty-five, twenty-nine of whom chose to write back. As anticipated, a number of these remain in the classroom, though at least some former students are now teaching students of their own at every level from elementary school to university, and a number are writers in one genre or another, including several journalists, a prize-winning poet, and three editors at major literary publications. A few are following more directly in the novelist's footsteps, including one woman who sent on a story about a pair of elderly Californians in which the couple's divided perspectives on their marriage are rendered through a split narrative avowedly indebted to *The Golden Bowl*. Others work in the theater, law, medicine, philanthropy or NGOs, and museums: a strikingly Jamesian list, on the whole, and one that recalls the two generations of the novelist's own family who were "never in a single case," as he put it, "guilty of a stroke of business."²² The results of this small survey, in other words, hardly count as scientific. Still, a response rate of over 40 percent is not bad, and says something, I hope, about James's continuing future as a novelist. "The writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters," James memorably wrote in an early review of George Eliot; and "when he makes him well, that is, makes him interested, then the reader does quite half the labor."²³ Not everyone from whom I heard remains a party to this contract, though a number report continuing to read or reread him – *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl* receive particular mention – and two describe working their way through the entire canon. (Having finished the novels, one is now "ambling . . . through the short stories" in chronological order: he is currently somewhere around 1893.) Those who still turn to James do not always do so professionally: indeed, the only member of the group who has thus far begun a career as a professor of literature confesses to having read no James since college, though his recollections also include struggling through *The Wings of the Dove* on his own one summer "during bumpy *matatu* rides in rural Uganda." The same writer apparently talked his way into the course while still a

sophomore because he was on the rebound from an unsuccessful encounter with vector calculus and James was “the hardest English class” he could find. “I wanted difficulty above all,” he recalls, and “part of what drew me in was the intense abstraction of the prose, the sense that I was as close as one could get, within a novel, to the blank formal mechanisms of mathematical proof. It reassured me to think that English prose could be inscrutable too.”

These thoughts of math are less idiosyncratic than they may appear, since James’s characters often engage in abstruse forms of proof, as when Fanny Assingham in *The Golden Bowl* attempts to convince herself that no prior affair took place between Charlotte Stant and the Prince, an effort James explicitly compares to a new kind of “arithmetic.”²⁴ But while only this respondent explicitly affirmed such a preference for the inscrutable, he was hardly alone in recording a fascination, however ambivalent, with the challenges of Jamesian prose.

It was not until the class ended and she began reading “novels *not* by James,” a recent student testified, that she realized how much she had “not only gotten used to but also started to enjoy – and to crave – reading [those] impossibly winding, opaque sentences.” Whether this made her “a book snob,” or “just a better reader – and hungrier for harder books,” she was not yet prepared to say. Another writer, at a longer remove from the course, nicely described how his partial bafflement at the time had eventually yielded to fuller understanding by invoking the temporal delay that so often structures James’s late style itself. “I knew I was too young, at twenty, for a novel like *The Ambassadors*,” he wrote,

but part of the reason I loved it so much was it gave me (valorized, aesthetic, pre-redeemed) structures of feeling I could live toward until I developed my own. And I think the intense reverence I had toward that Jamesian tensing of experience toward a future recall, call it the future subjunctive perfect, helped me to redeem a lot of the waste inherent to one’s twenties, even as it held me back in other ways.

What he has in mind, I believe, is a temporal trick that recurs throughout the late James, but especially in *The Ambassadors*, as the narrative shifts from Strether’s present experience to his future understanding or recollection of that experience. We are told, for instance, that “he was to know afterwards, in the watches of the night” how the sudden appearance of Chad Newsome at the opera has affected him, or that “he was to remember again repeatedly the medal-like Italian face” of Gloriani when he encounters that dazzling sculptor for the first and last time in his Parisian garden.²⁵ In *The Ambassadors*, as I have recently argued, such temporal shifts not only enact the delayed comprehension that is at the heart of Jamesian narrative generally but anticipate the memories that will prove the only recompense for the fifty-five-year-old protagonist’s belated expedition to Paris.²⁶ I find it oddly moving, then, to learn of a twenty-year-old anticipating such “future recall” of his own encounters with the novelist.

Of course, most of James's Americans abroad are considerably younger than Strether, and a few students headed off to Europe after graduation keenly aware that their stories might already have been scripted for them. One woman, now resident for over a decade in England, describes measuring all her early experiences against the standard set by Isabel Archer. "Whenever 'Isabel' appears in one of my emails home," she writes, "it's a sign that I'm about to complain that my expat life is cruder or grubbier than I'd hoped it would be." Even as she determined not to be the kind of "loud . . . self-important" American about which her new acquaintances complained, she "hadn't moved to England to become English" but to prove "James's version of the 'American girl': a heroine down to her fingertips." A male student who also headed to England before traveling on the Continent likewise describes adopting James as a "prism" through which to view his new experiences, though his alternative was not the Ugly American but the distinctively English world of Evelyn Waugh. While his fellow students at Cambridge "all aspired, more or less openly, to find their parts in a reenactment of *Brideshead Revisited* (the early chapters only, of course)," he preferred to imagine himself "a vaguely perplexed American, attracted by class systems he didn't fully understand, spending the money of industrial America" – not the self-made fortunes of Christopher Newman or Adam Verver in his case, but a Mellon fellowship – "in Gothic settings on both sides of the Channel." James, he says, provided him "with a sort of spiritual geography" by which to map his European travels, whether he was carrying the *Italian Hours* (1909) on a first visit to Italy or simply passing by the French seaside on a train or plane and recalling "a certain memory of alienation and of coming to knowledge" that he associates with *What Maisie Knew*. He never made it to Boulogne itself, but he continues to identify its location with the end of Maisie's childhood.

Memory of novels appears to resemble other kinds of memory, attaching less to events in chronological order than to psychological or emotional patterns, on the one hand, and particular moments or images, on the other. A woman who admitted to feeling "hazy on the details" of *Maisie's* plot nonetheless testified to still thinking about the young girl's consciousness in relation to her own, while James's "description of Isabel Archer preferring to look inward at the garden within her mind, as opposed to outward at the world," continues to provide her with a monitory image of egoism. Several correspondents recalled how James's characters awaken to knowledge and learn to grapple with other people – the discovery of "the sheer, unbelievable depth of the human individual," as a recent graduate put it, and how that resonated with their own coming of age or professional development. "I don't know if I realized at the time how deeply I identified with Isabel," confessed a woman who had written her final essay on that heroine's struggle to fulfill her potential, "but I used to think about it a lot as I faced my own choices about various paths to take" – choices, she hastened to add, "mostly about career,

not mate” that “fortunately” did not end with an Osmond. A woman now beginning to publish fiction herself similarly recalled how she approached “the sudden precipice of life after school” as if she were the protagonist of a novel, one whose future might be grasped if she could understand herself as fully as James understood his characters. “What would happen to me? And who was I?” she recalled asking. “Thinking about the way those two questions were linked – and James certainly suggested that they were – fueled a lot of my early adulthood. Of course, I am sure I would have thought about that anyway, even without James” she acknowledged, “but I felt less lonely doing so after reading him.”

A lawyer in Los Angeles likewise associated the reading of James with the process of self-reflection, while also remarking the affinities between the novelist’s interest in “why people know what they think they know” and the development of evidence in the American legal system, a connection that might have amused that law-school dropout. “I think that what most stuck with me from James (besides the prodigious length of his sentences),” wrote another man now settled in Israel, “was the awareness that the journeys we make inside our own consciousness are every bit as dramatic as those we undertake in the ‘real’ world. In a deep way, perhaps, these are the most significant roads we travel.” A medical resident in Boston, inspired by an encounter between a dying patient still in his forties and the female cousin whose arrival had visibly reanimated him, chose to share with them a passage from *The Portrait of a Lady* in which Isabel pays a similar visit to her dying cousin, Ralph Touchett. “I don’t know if these lines gave any comfort,” the doctor writes. “I know James had no intention of being used as a Hallmark card. . . . But this patient, at least, has not required any more opiates since I handed him that passage.” The passage culminates in the memorable line, “nothing mattered now but the only knowledge that was not pure anguish – the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together.”²⁷

Looking over these responses, I am struck by how often what continues to reverberate in readers’ minds is the wording of such individual lines or even phrases. “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost”; “Live all you can . . . it’s a mistake not to”; “I want a happiness without a hole in it”; “the shriek of a soul in pain”; “the balloon of experience”: these fragments came echoing back in my students’ memories, as apparently happened to James himself when his own words from “The Art of Fiction” resurfaced to describe the protagonist of *The Princess Casamassima* as “a youth on whom nothing was lost.”²⁸ James’s style may be notoriously elaborate, but the capacity of his language to compress experience and emotion in this way is one reason, perhaps, that some of his best readers are otherwise drawn to poetry. Indeed, a poet among my correspondents recalled how her own style began to morph after reading him: a shift to “long lines with grammatically reticulated sentences” that felt like “a revelation” to some-

one still in search of her voice. Another described writing poems “infused with imagery and associations” suggested by his work. But you do not need to mimic James’s style in order to appreciate its effects, as many of these respondents testified. One of those who recalled his advice to be someone “on whom nothing is lost” confessed to having struggled painfully with the novelist’s prose as a student, even while taking courage as an aspiring fiction writer from James’s suggestion that good work need not be limited to the author’s immediate experience. A reporter interning at a national newspaper understandably observed that his editors would “kill” him if he wrote like James. Still, he too invoked the phrase from “The Art of Fiction” as a model for his own kind of work: a journalism ideally alert to how the smallest cues may signify.

All of which is not to say that James emerges unquestioned from these reminiscences. An online journalist observes regretfully that he no longer reads such “intricate prose” as James’s, lest its reverberations interfere with the crisp style his profession demands. “This is part of the sadness of adulthood,” he writes: “we nurture the parts of us that are useful to the world and shear off the rest. That sadness is much of what James means to me now; he is part of that sheared mass that cannot be reconciled with the requirements of the world.” An elementary school teacher admits that he never quite took to the novels, in part because he thought their social interactions dated, though he did enjoy writing a paper on the Jamesian uncanny: an experience he now uses as an object lesson when his students balk at some required reading, by suggesting that they too can find something of interest even in an author they dislike. A correspondent who recalls the “quiet dazzlement” with which he initially responded to James now finds himself questioning the language in which the novelist formulates aesthetic judgments, wondering, for example, whether terms like “fine,” on the one hand, and “vulgar,” on the other, are not too nebulous to capture the specific effects of artistic craftsmanship. Others describe resistant afterthoughts about the ethical values that appear to govern the novels – protesting the “solipsism” that marks the close of *The Ambassadors*, for instance, with its determined sacrifice of Maria Gostrey to an ideal of conduct seemingly endorsed by Strether and James alike, or wondering if a morality grounded in not imposing one’s will on other people is adequate to a world whose well-being increasingly seems to require collective action. For yet another correspondent, the questions are not so much ethical as metaphysical. “I keep wondering,” he writes, “why reality – a real encounter between two people – is always something sinister in the Jamesian universe . . . why so much of life seems to happen in the imagination, and whether that’s something to celebrate or something to mourn.” In his case, at least, such doubts have not precluded a determination that someday he will have read everything James wrote.

“The whole conduct of life consists of things done, which do other things in their turn,” James declared, as he approached the end of his Prefaces for the New

York Edition. The “doing” he had in mind, characteristically, was the act of writing, and in looking over these responses, I have been struck above all by the truth of this claim.²⁹ Sometimes the “other things” James’s work is doing here takes the form of more writing; sometimes, of more reading, not just of James himself but of novels and short stories by his contemporaries like George Eliot or Edith Wharton or by more distant heirs like James Baldwin, whose intense admiration for his predecessor one student excitedly discovered only after she too had thought of James while reading the ending of “Sonny’s Blues.” But art also lives, as James said, upon discussion, and there appears to be plenty of that too, both in and out of the classroom. I heard from a beginning graduate student whose devotion to James has already become the stuff of rumor among her cohort and an advanced student who has started to teach him, but also from a woman whose early morning bus rides have been enlivened by chats with a software programmer who happens to be an avid Jamesian, as well as from a recently graduated couple who continue to debate just how “slightly” they prefer *The Portrait of a Lady* to *The Ambassadors*. A wife explains to her husband how the meaning of James’s sentences comes through despite their difficulty; a daughter recommends *The Portrait of a Lady* to her mother and helps decode some puzzling passages; another daughter triggers “a bit of a James mania” in her household, which results in her parents’ listening to *The American* on tape, having mistaken it for *The Ambassadors*, and in her own acquisition of a box of old James novels that had once belonged to her grandfather, a Chinese mathematician. These, too, are among the things that the novelist’s deeds make happen.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, in *Autobiographies: A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years, Other Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Library of America, 2016), 108.
- ² Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, in *Autobiographies*, ed. Horne, 435, 463.

- ³ Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 521.
- ⁴ For competing claims as to priority in this regard – the rival claimants taught at Columbia and Yale, respectively – see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 124. On the first university courses in English literature in Britain, see Alan Bacon, “English Literature Becomes a University Subject: King’s College, London as Pioneer,” *Victorian Studies* 29 (4) (1986): 591–612.
- ⁵ See Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- ⁶ Henry James to William Dean Howells, August 17, 1908, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1999), 463.
- ⁷ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Henry James: Literary Criticism – Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 45, 44.
- ⁸ Henry James to William Dean Howells, February 3, 1876, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Horne, 66–67.
- ⁹ James, “The Art of Fiction,” 44.
- ¹⁰ See Peter Brooks, *Henry James Goes to Paris* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- ¹¹ James, “The Art of Fiction,” 44.
- ¹² Henry James to William Dean Howells, March 30, 1877, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Horne, 83.
- ¹³ Henry James, Preface to *The American*, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 11, 4.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9–11.
- ¹⁵ Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (London: Penguin, 2009), 3.
- ¹⁶ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 76.
- ¹⁷ See Michael Anesko, “Friction with the Market”: *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 141–162.
- ¹⁸ Henry James, Preface to *Roderick Hudson*, ed. Geoffrey Moore (London: Penguin, 1986), 36.
- ¹⁹ James, *The Golden Bowl*, 34.
- ²⁰ Henry James to Frederic William Henry Myers, December 19, 1898, in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Horne, 314.
- ²¹ For more on Softley’s film, see Ruth Bernard Yeazell, “Sex, Lies, and Motion Pictures,” *Henry James Review* 25 (1) (2004): 87–96.
- ²² James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 118.
- ²³ Henry James, “The Novels of George Eliot,” in *Henry James: Literary Criticism*, ed. Edel and Wilson, 922.
- ²⁴ “Yes, it was distinctly as if she had proved what was needing proof . . . Old arithmetic had perhaps been fallacious, but the new settled the question.” James, *The Golden Bowl*, 81.

- ²⁵ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 2008), 119, 162.
- ²⁶ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Remembrance of Things Present in *The Ambassadors*," *Henry James Review* 38 (3) (2017): 231–237.
- ²⁷ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 478.
- ²⁸ James, "The Art of Fiction," 53; James, *The Ambassadors*, 176; James, *The Golden Bowl*, 483, 538; James, Preface to *The American*, 10; and Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima*, ed. Derek Brewer (London: Penguin, 1987), 164.
- ²⁹ James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, 21.