

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 44 (2024)

Artikel: Henry James and the phenomenology of life
Autor: Jones, Patrick
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1053572>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 30.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

PATRICK JONES
(UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA)

Henry James and the Phenomenology of Life

When Lambert Strether exhorts John “Little” Bilham to “live!” (154) in Henry James’ *The Ambassadors* (1903), we trust that we know what he means. What, after all, could be more self-evident than the idea that life should be experienced as fully and enjoyably as possible, and that it is a mistake not to do so? Going against the grain of critical consensus, in this essay I argue that Strether’s injunction becomes ringed with uncertainty the moment that it is subjected to analytic scrutiny. This uncertainty does not generate scepticism about the possibility of leading a life, but is rather an invitation to pose questions about the everyday language we employ to describe, evaluate, and make sense of the activity of ‘living.’ I claim that James uses the breakdown of Strether’s speech to draw attention to the fact that much of this language is wedded to a hyperbolic picture of agency that is either rigidly voluntaristic or deterministic. I show how James’ representation of Strether’s consciousness of himself as an agent puts pressure on this picture by making it difficult to determine whether he is acting or being acted upon.

Keywords: Henry James; living; agency; phenomenology; *The Ambassadors*; Marion Milner; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

As a young woman the psychoanalyst Marion Milner was haunted by a vague but nagging sense that she was “shut away from whatever might be real in living” (2). In an attempt to remedy this barely articulable feeling of alienation, Milner began to jot down in her journal “moments in [her] daily life which had been particularly happy” (xxxiii). She then went over these diary entries and analysed them, “in order to see whether [she] could discover any rules about the conditions in which happiness occurred” (xxxiii). The results of this quasi-scientific experiment in self-examination are chronicled in meticulous detail in *A Life of One’s Own* (1934), “the record of a seven years’ study of living” (xxxiii). In her project’s initial phase, Milner makes a startling discovery: she can only ex-

press her newly sharpened aspiration to lead an authentic life of her own in language which is “astonishing[ly]” different from her “normal speech” (3). The following diary entry captures one of these “outpourings” (3) breaking down in the very act of its articulation:

What I want is, not when I came to die to say, ‘I’ve been as useful as I know how’ – I ought to want that but I don’t. I want to feel I have ‘lived.’ But what on earth do I mean by that? I mean something silly and Sunday paperish like ‘plumbing the depths of human experience,’ or ‘drinking life to the dregs.’ What nonsense it sounds. I suppose I’ve got a Sunday paper mind. (3)

Almost as soon as she has put pen to paper, Milner’s “outpouring” becomes haloed with uncertainty. The bathetic question “but what on earth do I mean by that?” acts upon it like a pinprick, deflating its “heroic phrases” (3) and reducing them to little more than “silly” platitudes – to unthinking repetitions of the kind of bland, homiletic advice one might come across whilst reading the Sunday paper. The language that Milner has at her disposal to articulate her dissatisfaction with the life she is leading is not only “astonishing[ly]” different from her everyday manner of speaking; it is also “astonishing[ly]” thin, hyperbolic, and inadequate. It cannot bear the weight of what it tries to express.

Strikingly, the uncertainty that Milner registers towards her “heroic phrases” does not weaken her trust in the possibility of leading a fulfilling life. As the rest of *A Life of One’s Own* attests, the “astonishing” breakdown of her “outpouring” pushes her instead to redescribe her desire for a more fulfilling life in terms that are practically achievable and less self-punishing. Lives are not, Milner realises, achieved through heroic acts of self-striving or wasted through reticence or weakness of will. Such an uncompromisingly voluntaristic conceptualisation of ‘living’ cannot do justice to the “actively-passive” (163) nature of our experience of life. In this sense, then, Milner finds a way to use the uncertainty her “outpouring” generates; she is able to *do* something with it.

The central argument of this essay is that Henry James invites us to be similarly “astonished” by the language his characters use to articulate penumbral feelings of dissatisfaction, loss, or alienation with regard to the lives they are leading. Taking Lambert Strether’s famous “live all you can” (153) speech in *The Ambassadors* (1903) as a representative example of this phenomenon, I will demonstrate that his Milner-esque “outpouring” is, to borrow a formulation from Sharon Cameron, “so poorly equipped to withstand scrutiny” as a practical philosophy of life that it

“almost appear[s] designed to give way” (9).¹ It would nevertheless be an error to treat Strether’s speech as “fortune-cookie advice at best” (Haralson 169), good only for selling commodities (Tintner 2) and fuelling cruelly optimistic fantasies of the good life. Like Milner, James does not generate uncertainty about Strether’s speech for skeptical ends. I want to suggest instead that he uses Strether’s speech – and particularly the event of its breakdown – to highlight what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the “middle ranges of agency: the field in which most of consciousness, perception, and relationality really happen” (79).

Sedgwick observes that we are wedded to a melodramatically binarised picture of agency: we either act, or are acted upon; we are either radically free, or we are passengers in a life that is driven by our biological and socio-cultural determinations. This binarised model nevertheless has tenuous descriptive purchase on the complexity of our ordinary lived experience as agents. Not only do we rarely feel ourselves to be totally empowered or disempowered, but it can be “notoriously difficult,” as Andrew H. Miller puts it, “to determine degrees of activity and passivity” or “to calculate whether we have ourselves foreclosed a possibility (by acting or failing to act) or whether that possibility was foreclosed for us” (121–122). In what follows, I will put forward the claim that the breakdown of Strether’s speech throws into relief the middle-ranged complexity of James’ representation of agency elsewhere in *The Ambassadors*. The most striking manifestations of this complexity occur in the dilated interstices that James inserts between instances of direct speech and which punctuate action-led scenes of crisis and transformation. As I will demonstrate through close readings of two passages from Book Third, Chapter II, these interstices are home to dense interior monologues in which James’ narrative technique works to blur the boundary between activity and passivity and so bring the “middle ranges of agency” into tighter focus.

¹ Cameron is writing about *The Golden Bowl* (1904) here. In a characteristically bracing passage, she draws attention to the ways in which that novel “seems to propose psychologically realistic explanations that do not explain the phenomenon purportedly being accounted for” (9). These explanations, she explains, are “so poorly equipped to withstand scrutiny [that they] almost appear designed to give way.”

1. Obstruction and Flow

Lambert Strether is a middle-aged journal editor from Woollett, a provincial city in Massachusetts. “Melancholy, missing, [and] striving” (James, *Notebooks* 550), Strether has been dispatched to Paris as the envoy of his fiancée, Mrs. Newsome. His ambassadorial mission is to repatriate her wayward son, Chad, who has chosen to linger in Europe’s “vast bright Babylon” (*The Ambassadors* 63) rather than take up business interests back home, presumably on account of his entanglement with a woman of dubious morality. Much like Milner, Strether is “vaguely haunted by the feeling of what he has missed, though this a quantity, and a quality, that he would be rather at a loss to name” (*Notebooks* 543). This vague feeling, which James describes as “a lot of accumulated perception and emotion” (557), erupts in Book Fifth, Chapter II in the following “outbreak” (*The Ambassadors* xxix), which is addressed to his young friend, John “Little” Bilham, during a garden party hosted by a famous sculptor:

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? [...]. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. [...]. 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. [...]. Do what you like so long as you don’t make *my* mistake. For it was a mistake. Live! (153–154)²

This is one of the best-known passages in James’ oeuvre and it has been the object of much commentary. Critical responses to Strether’s speech have tended to take two forms. In broad and superlative terms, it is routinely singled out for being moving and memorable. Leon Edel, for example, describes the speech as “one of the most poignant soliloquies in all of James’s fiction” (535), a thought echoed by Pierre Walker who considers it to be “among the most moving passages Henry James ever wrote” (80). Otherwise, the speech tends to serve as a yardstick for judging Strether’s comportment and development over the course of the

² Because Strether’s speech runs to more than a page, I can only offer an abridged version of it here. In deciding which elements to foreground, I have followed the paraphrase of the speech that James offers in his preface to the novel (xxix).

novel. Does Strether manage, however belatedly, to “live” in Paris?³ Or does he betray his own advice?⁴ In framing their readings around such questions critics express a strong if often only tacitly expressed belief that the core message of Strether’s speech is sound and that it is possible to succeed or fail to live up to it. In this sense, critics trust that both the meaning and actionability of the injunction “live!” is self-evident and this trust then becomes the basis of their critical judgement.

But closer inspection reveals these judgements to rest on highly unstable grounds. Strether’s speech is a patchwork of potentially aporetic philosophical questions about freedom, action, and illusion that bears, as many scholars have remarked, more than a passing resemblance to Lord Henry Wotton’s “will[fully] paradox[ical]” (19) advice to Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).⁵ It is nevertheless important to remember that when Lord Henry exhorts Dorian to “live the wonderful life that is in [him]!” (22), it is in full knowledge that he is not offering his interlocutor a robust or actionable philosophy of life. Indeed, the intensely satirical energies of Wilde’s novel turn on the fact that in devoting himself to a life of hedonistic pleasure Dorian naïvely misinterprets Lord Henry’s aestheticist shibboleths by translating them into crudely determinate actions. Strether’s speech, on the contrary, is delivered without Lord Henry’s knowing cynicism, and represents a sincere and urgent expression of his felt sense of having failed to coincide with his life. His outpouring to Bilham may career, to borrow a formulation from Hugh Kenner, “near the brink of parody” but this is “without detriment to our awareness that something enchanting has happened” (9).⁶

In comparison to the clipped, aphoristic elegance of Lord Henry’s injunctions to Dorian, Strether’s speech immediately strikes a slightly flat

³ For three readings which argue that Strether learns how to “live” in Paris, see Millicent Bell (413); Collin Meissner (155); and Robert B. Pippin (159).

⁴ For three readings which suggest that Strether fails to live up to his own advice, see Philip M. Weinstein (1); Edward Engelberg (135); and David McWhirter (167).

⁵ Writing of the “the complicated anti-Wildean dialectics of *The Ambassadors*,” Jonathan Freedman claims that “as everyone knows, the words that Lambert Strether speaks to little Bilham [...] are quoted almost verbatim from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” (168). Glenn Clifton, however, notes that “Freedman claims that ‘everyone knows’ Strether is virtually quoting Wilde. But indeed everyone does not know it, and Edel does not even seem to think James read Wilde’s novel” (300).

⁶ Kenner is writing here about Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

note. The semi-colon that sits between “live all you can” and “it’s a mistake not to” measures a pause that is overly ponderous for a galvanising appeal to “drink life to the dregs.” Evoking the spectre of determinism, the qualifying phrase “all you can” also undercuts the expected voluntarist message of the speech. “Live all you can” raises a potentially disquieting set of questions about the limits of free will: what if our power to “live” were predetermined by conditions that are ultimately outside of our control? Is it possible to recognise these structural limitations and maintain a sense of our potential to steer our lives in better or worse directions? Strether offers Bilham little reassurance to this end when he reformulates his initial exhortation in positively Zola-esque terms:

The affair – I mean the affair of life – couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me; for it’s at best a tin mould, either fluted or 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 (153).⁷

The second sentence of Strether’s speech houses not a call for action, as we might expect, but rather a call for possession. Bilham is not being encouraged to throw himself into particular life-enhancing activities (such as attending opulent garden parties or travelling) but rather to “have” his life. The knottiness of this idea of “living” as possessing life is emphasised by the rhetorical question that follows. Difficult to enunciate without deliberately sounding each word, this tangle of present and past perfects forces one to chew over three different modalities of “having” (“haven’t,” “have,” and “had”) and raises a number of questions. What does it mean to “have” (a) life? More precisely, given that a rudimentary definition of the verb “live” is “to possess life” (“Live”), what exactly is the nature of the dispossession Bilham will succumb to if he makes Strether’s “mistake”? How can one be alive and not “living”?

These questions become all the more arresting through their association with freedom and illusion. Predictably, Strether infers that “living” relates to the exercise of freedom. Entirely unpredictably, he then declares such freedom to be illusory before stressing the necessity of having this illusion at the “right time.” The ensuing logic is striking. “Living,” it would seem, is a matter of *having the memory of the illusion of freedom*.

⁷ This curious affirmation of determinism immediately precedes the line “what one loses one loses; make no mistake about that” (153).

Bilham, then, is faced with something like a double bind. Strether has effectively exposed his young friend to the possibility that “living” is an illusion, but he nevertheless admonishes him to not make the mistake of becoming disillusioned. To identify an illusion as an illusion is necessarily to dilute that illusion’s power and to render it, even if momentarily, inoperative. Is it possible to be fully absorbed in an idea when one has been confronted with the possibility that it might be illusory? If illusions are, as Nietzsche famously argues, practical necessities, how does one knowingly cultivate or maintain them?⁸

These are just some of the questions that Strether’s speech poses and they put significant pressure on the notion that, to recall one of the “heroic phrases” in Milner’s “outpouring,” it represents a straightforward exhortation to “drink life to the dregs.” Indeed, Strether’s resolutely impractical advice erodes any trust that we might place in such stock phrases and works to deconstruct the voluntarist conception of “living” that undergirds them. It would be a simplification, however, to understand Strether’s deterministic remarks as a reflection of “James’s fatalistic vision of human experience” (McWhirter 167). Far from substituting one “all-or-nothing understanding of agency” (Sedgwick 19) with another, I will argue in the remainder of this essay that James marshals the breakdown of Strether’s speech to throw into relief a picture of leading a life that is better scaled to our lived experience.

For readers who are familiar with James’ prefatory remarks about Strether’s “irrepressible outbreak” (xxix) this argument might seem counterintuitive. After all, when James writes of the speech being “planted or ‘sunk,’ stiffly and saliently, in the centre of the [novel’s] current, almost perhaps to the obstruction of traffic” (xxix), he figures it as being nothing less than the salient point of *The Ambassadors*. Not only does it “stan[d] above [...] [its] general surface or outline,” but it is the locus of that which “leaps and moves as alive” (“Salient”) in the novel that James estimated to be “quite the best [...] of [his] productions” (xxx). James seems only to intensify the sense that the speech is the novel’s chief point of interest when he rephrases his metaphor on the following page: “there [the speech] stands [...] full in the tideway; driven in with hard taps, like some strong stake for the noose of a cable, the swirl of the current roundabout it” (xxx). Guided by these prefatory comments, it is perhaps unsurprising that readers of *The Ambassadors* have overwhelmingly tended to hook their readings of the novel around the speech and have treated it as

⁸ For an overview of Nietzsche’s ideas concerning the necessity of illusion, see Daniel Came.

though it were a dry and sturdy perch from which to survey and evaluate its central protagonist's adventures.

But to distinguish the speech in this way is to overlook that James' metaphor of the "stake" and "current" demands a doubled perspective. A pole in fast-flowing water certainly interpellates the eye on account of its inertness, but that same inertness also works to render "the swirl of the current roundabout it" more visible than it would otherwise be. The same is true, I think, of Strether's speech. Impelling and obstructing readerly attention, it insistently brings into view the narrative that flows around it. Eschewing "outpourings" and "heroic phrases," this narrative traffics instead in dense interior monologues which make it difficult to attribute origins or reasons to Strether's actions. The fact that these origins and reasons are often "too fine [and] too floating to produce on the spot their warrant" (428) is not only a reflection of Strether's incapacity to act decisively with regard to his ambassadorial mission, nor of his tendency to dress "possibilit[ies] in vagueness" (396). It is also a reflection of James' phenomenological interest in representing what Daniel M. Gross describes as "the simultaneity of [our] being active and being passive, [...] constructive and constructed" (17).

2. The Middle Ranges of Agency

"They were in the presence of Chad himself" (95). By the time the narrator of *The Ambassadors* makes this long-awaited announcement in Book Third, Chapter II, Strether has already been indirectly exposed to the "irregular life" (82) of his potential son-in-law. In Book Second, Chapter II, Strether passes by Chad's apartment on the Boulevard Malesherbes and observes a young man he does not recognise smoking on the balcony. Despite learning from the concierge that Chad is not in Paris and that one of his friends is looking after his apartment, Strether nevertheless finds himself climbing the stairs to the "mystic troisième" (422) out of an "uncontrollable, a really, if one would, depraved curiosity" (72). This curiosity puts him in contact with John "Little" Bilham, who goes on to introduce Strether to Chad's friends. As he imbibes their conversation and hospitality, Strether feels himself "in the presence of new measures, other standards, [and] a different scale of relations" (79). Strether is lucid enough to recognise that he might, as the object of a carefully directed performance, be in "the most gilded of traps" (79), but he smokes cigarettes for the first time in his life under the influence of his new acquaint-

ances, a symbol of his manner of “blindly, almost wildly pushing forward” (81) into his ambassadorial mission.

Seeking to make sense of the information he has been drip-fed about the absent Chad, at the beginning of Book Third, Chapter II Strether appeals to the judgement of Maria Gostrey, who has spent some time in Bilham’s company and is said to possess an uncanny ability to “pigeonhole her fellow mortals” (7). Maria offers him some reassuring clarifications. The fact that Chad is in Cannes is a positive sign – “decent men don’t go to Cannes with the – well, with the kind of ladies you mean” (87) – and Bilham is deemed trustworthy. “He’s one of *us*” (87), she states emphatically. With typical empirical rigour, she nevertheless withholds pronouncing on Strether’s case until she has more evidence. This evidence is to come “a day or two” (90) after their conversation. Maria has reserved a box at the theatre and suggests offering a place to Bilham. Strether sends an invitation to Chad’s apartment, but receives no response and Bilham is not there when they are seated. In the moments before the play begins, a restless Strether raises the question of whether Chad and Bilham are engaged in a “conspiracy” (93). Strether receives a response to this question in the form of Chad himself arriving just as the curtain rises. Strether is not only surprised by the unannounced entrance of the young man, but also by the fact that Chad’s appearance has undergone a “change so complete” that Strether feels himself in the presence of the “sharp rupture of an identity” (96). Book Third, Chapter II ends with the two men leaving the theatre to go to the café where Strether will, at the beginning of Book Fourth, tell Chad “almost breathlessly” that he has come to Paris to “make [Chad] break with everything” (103).

Writing plot summaries of James’ “major phase” novels (Matthiessen xv) is a treacherous business for it necessitates a taming of the ambiguities and discontinuities produced by his famously demanding late style.⁹ In this instance, my synopsis overlooks the fact that the dramatic interest of Book Third, Chapter II resides less in the conversations that Strether has with other characters than in the interior monologues which provide their connective tissue. Offering a rich insight into the “middle ranges of agency,” the following example occurs in a remarkably dilated interstice inserted between two instances of direct speech. In the moments before Chad’s surprise entrance, Maria shares some of her “impressions and conclusions” (91) about Bilham with Strether’s surly friend and compatriot,

⁹ For Francis O. Matthiessen, James’ three final novels represent the “major phase” and signal achievement of his career: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904).

Waymarsh. Fully aware of Waymarsh's animosity towards Europeanised expatriates, she launches into a goading speech in which she declares that Bilham is "far and away [...] the best of [Americans]" (91). Between Maria's frivolous remarks and Strether's fateful response to them – "Is it then a conspiracy?" (93) – we find the following lines:

What was he, all the same, to do? [Strether] looked across the box at his friend [Waymarsh]; their eyes met; something queer and stiff, something that bore on the situation but that it was better not to touch, passed in silence between them. Well, the effect of it for Strether was an abrupt reaction, a final impatience of his own tendency to temporise. Where was that taking him anyway? It was one of the quiet instants that sometimes settle more matters than the outbreaks dear to the historic muse. The only qualification of the quietness was the synthetic 'Oh hang it!' into which Strether's share of the silence soundlessly flowered. It represented, this mute ejaculation, a final impulse to burn his ships. These ships, to the historic muse, may seem of course mere cockles, but when he presently spoke to Miss Gostrey it was with the sense at least of applying the torch. 'Is it then a conspiracy?' (93)

At first glance, this excerpt seems to narrate a straightforward movement from confused deliberation to decisive, ship-burning action. Exasperated by Maria's irreverence, and admonished by Waymarsh's glance, Strether steers the conversation away from Bilham's national identity towards the more urgent matter of his potentially being involved in a conspiracy with Chad. It is not, however, Waymarsh's look that provokes Strether's intervention, but "something queer and stiff" that "passe[s] in silence between them." Of no precise origin, this touchable concrete presence produces an "effect" that precipitates an "abrupt reaction" and a "mute ejaculation." With their evocations of passivity and impulse, these two phrases undermine the sense that Strether is acting purposively and highlight that James is narrating the advent of an action that lacks a specific cause.

The stakes of this gesture are underlined by James in a sentence whose metafictional overtones are unmistakable: "It was one of the quiet instants that sometimes settle more matters than the outbreaks dear to the historic muse." It may be impossible to determine the strength or weakness of Strether's agency in these "quiet instants," and they certainly lack the dramatic clamour that characterises his "irrepressible outbreak" (xxix) to Bilham in Book Fifth, Chapter II and events of world-historical signific-

ance more generally.¹⁰ They are nevertheless rich in narrative interest and do important work in moving the plot forward. The theatrical backdrop of Strether's "mute ejaculation" also enables James to establish a subtle opposition between novelistic and theatrical forms of representation, and invites us to reflect upon the specific affordances of each genre. It is difficult to imagine a dramatist, for instance, replicating the ambiguity which hovers over the statement about the "historic muse." Is this the narrator's commentary or a narration of Strether's own thought in free indirect style? The interlacing of narratorial and figural voices in Strether's interior monologues makes it difficult to determine the degree of Strether's consciousness of himself as an agent, whilst also raising the striking possibility that the narrator's perspicacity might not have sufficient reach to, say, identify the "queer [...] something" that prompts his hero to intervene in a conversation. Such a "middle-ranged" picture of agency contrasts starkly with the one proffered by Strether's "live all you can" speech, whose staginess is accentuated by the fact that it is delivered "slowly and sociably, with full pauses and straight dashes" (154).

If the passage I have just analysed narrates what happens in a brief pause in a conversation, other interior monologues in Book Three, Chapter II offer more explicitly retrospective reports of Strether's attempts to make sense of and give reasons for Chad's "transformation unsurpassed" (97). For the most part, the dominant note of these reports is epistemological uncertainty. They foreground Strether's incapacity to assimilate the "vague and multitudinous" (95) rush of "sensations" (95) that is produced by "his perception of the young man's identity" (95). In the midst of all of this "bewilderment" (96), Strether's conviction in the following excerpt stands out:

He was to know afterwards, in the watches of the night, that nothing would have been more open to him than after a minute or two to propose to Chad to seek with him the refuge of the lobby. He hadn't only not proposed it, but had lacked even the presence of mind to see it as possible. (98)

As Strether meditates on his reaction to Chad's unexpected entrance, he arrives at the knowledge that "nothing would have been more open to him" than to have taken a different, more deliberate course of action. The

¹⁰ In his preface, James ironically aligns Strether's speech with such events when he writes of the "revolution" (xxxviii) experienced by his protagonist in Paris, a "revolution" which finds its noisiest articulation in his "irrepressible outbreak" to Bilham.

certainty that is evinced in these self-recriminatory remarks nevertheless strikes a false note. According to Strether's simplistic aetiology, he continues to watch the play because he lacks the "gumption" (93) and imaginative dexterity to do otherwise. But his possibilities for action are hardly "open" and are instead decisively shaped by the timing of Chad's arrival and the normative demands of theatrical etiquette. Indeed, Chad's entrance is clearly calculated to stun Strether and unsettle his "presence of mind," and within the highly disciplined space of La Comédie-Française (90) whispering a proposal or leaving one's seat during a performance would risk provoking the disapproval of other spectators. Shorn of any reference to this context, Strether's judgement on his decision to continue watching the performance is paper-thin and ignores, rather than confronts, the notorious difficulty of calculating – to recall Miller's formulation – "whether we have ourselves foreclosed a possibility (by acting or failing to act) or whether that possibility was foreclosed for us" (121–122).

The above passages offer two examples of the ways in which Strether's interior monologues put pressure on "all-or-nothing understanding[s]" of agency (Sedgwick 19). In the first example, Strether's action "soundlessly flower[s]" in a split-second pause in a conversation and seems to float free of any precise origin or intention. The second example undermines the sense that Strether has acted "stupidly and without reaction" (98) by evoking the complex horizons of possibility in which agency manifests itself. In both instances, the "heroic phrases" that we tend to rely upon to describe, evaluate, and make sense of the activity of leading a life have tenuous explanatory purchase. Strether is neither "drinking life to the dregs" nor being deterministically dragged forward by forces beyond his control as he navigates the demand made upon him by Chad's surprise entrance. The fact that the distinction between activity and passivity is so often blurred in *The Ambassadors* certainly produces uncertainty, but this uncertainty works to bring into sharper and steadier focus the phenomenological complexity of leading a life.

References

- Bell, Millicent. "The Man Who Lived." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1973, pp. 391–414.
- Came, Daniel. "The Themes of Affirmation and Illusion in *The Birth of Tragedy* and Beyond." *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, edited by Ken Gemes and John Richardson, Oxford UP, 2013, pp. 209–225.
- Cameron, Sharon. *Thinking in Henry James*. U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Clifton, Glenn. "Aging and Periodicity in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Ambassadors: An Aesthetic Adulthood*." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2006, pp. 283–302.
- Edel, Leon. *Henry James: A Life*. Flamingo, 1996.
- Engelberg, Edward. *Elegiac Fictions: The Motif of the Unlived Life*. The Pennsylvania State UP, 1989.
- Freedman, Jonathan. *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*. Stanford UP, 1990.
- Gross, Daniel M. "Introduction: Being-Moved: The Pathos of Heidegger's Rhetorical Ontology." *Heidegger and Rhetoric*, edited by Daniel M. Gross and Ansgar Kemmann, State U of New York P, 2005, pp. 1–46.
- Haralson, Eric. "Lambert Strether's Excellent Adventure." *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, edited by Jonathan Freedman, Cambridge UP, 1998, pp. 169–186.
- James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. Oxford World's Classics, 2008.
- . *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers, Oxford UP, 1987.
- Kenner, Hugh. *Ulysses*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.
- "Live, V. (1)." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, March 2024, doi: 10.1093/OED/3219831624.
- Matthiessen, Francis O. *Henry James: The Major Phase*. Oxford UP, 1944.
- McWhirter, David. *Desire and Love in Henry James: A Study of the Late Novels*. Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Meissner, Collin. *Henry James and the Language of Experience*. Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Miller, Andrew H. "Lives Unled in Realist Fiction." *Representations*, vol. 98, no. 1, 2007, pp. 118–134.
- Milner, Marion. *A Life of One's Own*. Routledge, 2011.

Pippin, Robert B. *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*. Cambridge UP, 2001.

“Salient.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, December 2023, doi: 10.1093/OED/7481870302.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Weather in Proust*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg, Duke UP, 2011.

Tintner, Adeline. *Henry James’s Legacy: The Afterlife of His Figure and Fiction*. Louisiana State UP, 1998.

Walker, Pierre. “The James Family.” *Henry James in Context*, edited by David McWhirter, Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 80–90.

Weinstein, Philip M. *Henry James and the Requirements of Imagination*. Harvard UP, 1971.