

The Library of America interviews Ross Posnock about Henry James

In connection with the publication in January 2011 of [*Henry James: Novels 1903–1911*](#), edited by Ross Posnock, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

Sign up for the free monthly e-Newsletter at www.loa.org.

Henry James: Novels 1903–1911 collects the last three novels James published: *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Golden Bowl* (1904), and *The Outcry* (1911). Could you help us place them in the canon of James’s twenty novels? *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*, along with *The Wings of the Dove*, are the three great novels of James’s late period, the so-called “major phase.” They represent the rarest of literary achievements—an aging novelist, nearing the end of a long career, still evolving, still experimenting, still inspired by what he calls “the religion of doing” to “make it new.” Ever since his breakthrough in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) when he makes, late in the novel, Isabel Archer’s mere motionless act of “seeing” have as much vividness and drama as “the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate,” James had been devising a variety of ways to “show what an ‘exciting’ inward life may do for the person leading it.”

What James’s three crowning late novels do, with an unprecedented intensity, is to make plot largely synonymous with depicting mental life—the inner workings of consciousness, the thoughts and feelings of characters. “We see very few persons in *The Golden Bowl*, but the scheme of the book, to make up for that, is that we shall really see about as much of them as a coherent literary form permits,” James tells us in his preface to the novel.

How does The Outcry fit in with these later novels?

Finding an aesthetic lesson in his emotionally painful misadventures writing for the London stage in 1895, James fused the “scenic method” of drama, with its conversation and immediacy, to the interior drama of consciousness—the

Posnock on James

inward play of passion and response and re-vision—to produce such daring works as *What Maisie Knew* (1897), which is grounded in the developing mind of a girl from the ages of six to thirteen. *The Outcry* is another scenic novel written first as a play, then made into a theatricalized novel largely in dialogue. A “jaunty curiosity,” as John Updike has called it, *The Outcry* outsold *The Golden Bowl*, while remaining over the next century neglected by scholars and general readers alike. Its republication by LOA is most welcome and should introduce it to the readership it deserves.

These three novels were published some one hundred years ago and written in a style that Henry’s brother William called “crustaceous.” Why should we care about Henry James?

Art that takes time and effort is always its own reward. From my experience teaching Henry James for thirty years, that reward becomes for many students a palpable pleasure, but only after some labor of initiation recalibrates diminished habits of sustained attention. I begin the course with a challenge: I will show them James wasn’t kidding when he tells his reader (in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*) that “it all comes back to that, to my and your ‘fun’—if we but allow the term its full extension.”

The fun turns out to reside in the rigorous demands James makes on our attentiveness. Concentration becomes a pleasure thanks in part to the “verve and animal spirits” of James’s style, as his brother William once wrote of him. What William is pointing to is something still too seldom noticed about the novelist—the visceral immediacy with which he renders the interaction of his characters. Students enjoy reading aloud in class conversations from James’s novels. They learn that his way of rendering speech—its hesitations, silences, emphases, shifts of pitch and tone—carries the impress of the body. Speech in James enacts “gestures of the voice, those auditory movements of the body within utterance,” to borrow a phrase from cognitive scientist Brian Rotman. Our exposure to and entanglement with others, and our myriad ways of communicating, with words and especially beyond words, are the presiding facts and forces of the world of the three novels of the major phase.

In the world of James’s late novels seduction is also pervasive. The currents of sexual desire are everywhere, basic, first of all, to the plots of each book, but suffused into the texture of the prose. Be it the scheming, impoverished

Posnock on James

young lovers of *The Wings of the Dove* who ensnare a dying young American heiress, or in *The Golden Bowl* the lovers—the suave and beautiful Italian Prince Amerigo and Charlotte Stant, best friend of his wife, Maggie, and also newly married to Maggie’s father—whom Maggie will savagely but silently split apart, or the lovers Chad Newsome and Marie de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors*, both of whom the middle-aged hero, Lambert Strether, falls in love with: these couples and the third presence form the basic triangular scaffolding that James builds upon to ensure that desire drives the plot of each novel.

James spent longer writing The Golden Bowl than he did any of his other novels. During its creation he wrote to his agent that he believed he was “producing the best book I have ever done.” R. P. Blackmur has acclaimed it James’s “most poetic” novel. Is this really that different from James’s other novels?

The Golden Bowl is one of the great depictions in literature of consummated adult heterosexual passion, both adulterous and between spouses. In it an awakened wife, who loves her husband “too helplessly,” bides her time, never once lapsing into accusation and anger, but expressing all with the movements of her body and facial expression; and at last she reclaims him. The power of female sexuality is a remarkably pronounced force in the novel, as James relates its second half through the mind of the newly awakened Maggie.

James’s imagery can be shocking. Maggie imagines “her deciding to do something” to make Amerigo know that she now knows, as the sight “across her vision ten times a day [of] the gleam of a bare blade”: “she was no longer playing with blunt and idle tools.” Maggie is arming for battle and by the end of the novel the eroticized violence that suffuses her fantasies of taking revenge on Charlotte Stant culminates in imagining her father, Charlotte’s new husband, “as holding in one of his pocketed hands the end of a long silken halter looped round her beautiful neck. He didn’t twitch it, yet it was there; he didn’t drag her but she came.” Such passages, in their overtones of sadism, are disturbing and deliberately so, expressing James’s insistence on showing both the perverse pleasures of revenge and the inevitable cost of power and passion.

The ending to The Golden Bowl seems a new departure for James in being hopeful—not just for the couples but for the coexistence of American and

Posnock on James

European sensibilities. The child even lives. Had James come to some new understanding of relationships while writing this book?

For the first time in his fiction neither self-renunciation nor self-abnegation defines the fate of his main character. Whereas Isabel Archer, for instance, took flight from the embrace and the kiss of Casper Goodwood to return to her prison of a marriage in Rome, Maggie, in “acting up to the full privilege of passion,” banishes such moral masochism. The novel ends with an embrace between husband and wife that resolves everything and nothing. Adamant that she will not appear to be “waiting for a confession” from Amerigo, that “she should be ashamed to listen to the uttered word,” Maggie instead salutes Charlotte, who has silently accepted that she must depart England forever with her husband. Charlotte’s “splendid” style, Maggie informs her husband, is “our help, you see.” To which Amerigo responds by taking Maggie in his arms: “he tried, too clearly, to please her—to meet her in her own way; but with the result only that, close to her, her face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: ‘See? I see nothing but you.’ And the truth of it had, with this force, after a moment, so strangely lighted his eyes that, as for pity and dread of them, she buried her own in his breast.” With this wordless mutual surrender, and with all the tense ambivalence surrender contains, their marriage at last commences as the novel ends.

In your book The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity you devote an entire chapter to discussing “Violence in The Ambassadors.” Most readers don’t associate violence with Henry James and, if I understand your argument correctly, the violence occurs within Lambert Strether in the collision between the “consolation of redemption” and thrill of “vagrant curiosity.” What gives this conflict its violent charge?

“Acting up to the full privilege of passion” is not only Maggie’s achievement but also Lambert Strether’s. His receptivity, ease with contingency, his pursuit of what James calls “the unattainable art of taking things as they came,” brings him, like Maggie, to “an improvised post,” an “advanced” settlement, as if a “settler or trader in a new country. . . . The only geography marking it would be doubtless that of the fundamental passions.” James’s two pioneers—Maggie and Strether—strip away their defenses to reach a point of maximum exposure to shock. They

Posnock on James

live intensely in themselves but discover that intensity in their entanglement with and exposure to the people around them, “fed by every contact and every apprehension.” Such willed vulnerability makes Strether’s Parisian adventures pleasurable not in spite of but because they court injury at every turn. James expresses this riskiness through an abundance of violent imagery.

Reading *The Ambassadors* with James’s imperative of fun in mind encourages one to understand Strether as far more elusive and interesting than the sterile figure who appears in much critical opinion: vicarious, renunciatory, prissy, fearful, ascetic. These half-truths miss the point, for their target will not stand still: this middle-aged New England widower, sent to rescue a young man from the clutches of the Babylon of Paris, is daily in the throes of transformation once he begins to relax in the city. Newly arrived, sitting in the Luxembourg Gardens, Strether finds that “in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it.” Soon he is assailed by “an uncontrollable, really, if one would, a depraved curiosity” that never relents.

But Strether never really gives in to the temptations Europe offers him.

The challenge of *The Ambassadors* is that it refuses to supply an identity for what Strether is transformed into: “I’m incredible. I’m fantastic and ridiculous—I don’t explain myself even to myself,” he remarks. As is evident, he enjoys this opacity, which derives from so deep an immersion in the waywardness of experience that explanation is irrelevant. Achieving this condition of “not caring” becomes the key to “letting himself go, of diving deep” and “touching bottom,” even of risking violence and savoring that risk.

By the end of his botched ambassadorial mission, his Parisian pleasures, and his uncertain future, Strether discovers that “he was out, in truth, as far as it was possible to be.” On one level, one is tempted to dismiss Strether’s coming out as the trivial, if poignant, gropings of a fifty-five-year-old bachelor. But in his vulnerability and insouciance about success and failure, he is also puncturing the complacencies and confinements of the genteel, and finding the space to improvise new forms of identity and pleasure founded on risk—experiencing “the smash” of identity, intentions, and nearly all familiar moorings.

So great is Strether’s receptivity that the vicarious becomes a primary force rather than an evasion of experience. He suggests this late in the novel as he gains a “rather breathless sense of what Chad’s life was doing with Chad’s

Posnock on James

mother's emissary. It was dragging him, at strange hours, up the staircases of the rich; it was keeping him out of bed at the end of long hot days; it was transforming beyond recognition the simple, subtle, conveniently uniform thing that had anciently passed with him for a life of his own." Like the young Henry James, who "hung inveterately back" and hence appeared a "dunce," as he tells us in his autobiography, Strether's surrender also appears a "poor show" to the wider world. He leaves Paris with his professional prospects dim (thanks to his dilatory performance as an ambassador) but possessed of "treasures of the imagination."

*Would it be accurate to call **The Ambassadors** a transitional touchstone that bestrides nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction?*

Henry James was acutely aware that he was writing against the bustling spirit of his age, especially the impatience and distraction bred by technological modernity. As he said in 1902, soon after critical silence greeted *The Wings of the Dove*: "the *faculty of attention* has utterly vanished from the general Anglo-Saxon mind, extinguished at its source by" newspapers and magazines and illustrated weeklies. Yet, despite the bafflement (with some exceptions) of the general reading public and the daily reviewers, James's three late novels eventually came to be regarded as unparalleled achievements of novelistic art, of a piece with the high modernist summits reached by Joyce and Proust. James's canonization began soon after James's death in 1916, with influential homages by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, James's successors as cosmopolitan expatriates. In the thirties, Edmund Wilson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the critic Richard P. Blackmur (who collected James's prefaces into *The Art of the Novel*), declared their veneration of the Master; and Lionel Trilling in the postwar era helped revive James's stature after the onslaught of literary Stalinism had arraigned him as an effete snob adrift in the museum culture of Europe.

The Library of America's blog, [The Reader's Almanac](#), recently counted eleven novels published since 1993 in which Henry James figured as a character. How do you account for James's continued high visibility as a character and influence on literary culture? Do you find that any of these fictional recreations come close to capturing him?

While James may not be taught as frequently in colleges as he once was, he has

Posnock on James

enjoyed an amazingly durable afterlife on stage and film. It began in the mid-forties when a play and film adapted from *Washington Square* proved immensely popular as *The Heiress*; in 1961 there was *The Innocents*, the remarkable film based on “The Turn of the Screw” (the first of several incarnations). “Daisy Miller,” *The Bostonians*, and *The Portrait of a Lady* have all become films. All three of the major phase novels have been adapted to either film or television (or both in the case of *The Golden Bowl*). Maybe only Jane Austen surpasses James as a presence in the larger culture via the impact of adaptation.

But uniquely, James has inspired a virtual sub-genre of fiction in which he is a major character. It’s amusing that [The Reader’s Almanac](#) has counted so many novels in which Henry James figures as a character. Just this month, Cynthia Ozick has avowedly reworked the plot of *The Ambassadors* in her new novel *Foreign Bodies*. Colm Tóibín’s highly praised novel *The Master* is successful, especially in its first half, in giving James himself a body and desires. Perhaps the fertility of James as inspiration for novelists expresses fascination with his exemplary fidelity to art. The sacrificial quality of artistic commitment, its cost to personal life, was a subject that James enacted in his life and explored in fiction, and Tóibín dramatizes it as well in *The Master*.

Do you have any favorite passages from the books in the current volume?

I’ve already quoted quite a bit from *The Golden Bowl*. *The Ambassadors* has many splendid passages: Strether sitting on the “penny chair” in the Luxembourg Gardens in Book Second, reading a batch of letters from Mrs. Newsome and musing about his life, his mission, and his “extraordinary sense of escape”; Strether’s impassioned charge to Little Bilham in Gloriani’s garden in Book Fifth to “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to.” And of course the climactic “discovery scene” by the river in Book Eleventh when Strether realizes that the picturesque “man who held the paddles” and the woman with the pink parasol are Chad and Madame de Vionnet.

You began writing The Trial of Curiosity to “take Henry James seriously as an intellectual” and then quickly found that doing so inevitably entangled you with his brother William, the pragmatist philosopher, whom Henry considered his “inexhaustible authority.” The brothers certainly had different styles. Williams James is acclaimed for his clear, straightforward

Posnock on James

writing, Henry for being at times infuriatingly circuitous. What did William think of his brother's writing?

That's a particularly interesting question with regards to the later novels where Henry is pushing the limits of "coherent" form. Henry conducts his inward turn in a style that William described as one of "interminable elaboration of suggestive reference," in referring to *The Golden Bowl*. But "I have to admit your extreme success in this book," William acknowledges, while adding: "though your methods and my ideals seem the reverse." William, like many readers, preferred novels of "great vigor and decisiveness in the action" and he warned Henry: "in this crowded and hurried reading age, pages that require such close attention remain unread and neglected. You can't skip a word if you are to get the effect, and 19 out of 20 worthy readers grow intolerant. . . . 'Say it out, for God's sake,' they cry." These words have echoed down the century, accruing added weight in our age of the Internet.

The Library of America has now published all the novels, all the stories, and a great deal of the criticism of Henry James. Is there enough additional material for another Library of America Henry James volume?

A volume of autobiography—James's *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, plus the unfinished third volume, *The Middle Years*, would be a great volume. And it would be especially valuable since these works are not in print.