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Critical Specialization

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Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent value with which alone it is concerned, sniffs round the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of a buried bone.

—Henry James, 'The Spoils of Poynton'

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.

—Henry James, 'Roderick Hudson"

Sublime Increments: Measurement and the Sublime in *The Ambassadors*

The quotations above posit that the artist's challenge is the impossibility of "selection" and "discrimination." That is to say, defining a closed system of relations against an infinite number of possible permutations is an inherently difficult task. With a 'geometry of his own,' the novelist must delineate relations such that they fit within the bounds of a plot. In a sense, the novelist imposes limits—in the guise of types, measurements, scales, and forms—upon the seemingly infinite. In these terms, the artist's task of representation becomes paradoxical: measuring the immeasurable, limiting the unlimited, and bounding the sublime.

Put simply, the mathematical sublime is a crisis of scale. The mind is thoroughly overwhelmed by a given magnitude that exceeds the possibility of measurement: there exists no standard nor concept that is equal to it. As Kant writes, the mathematical sublime is "that which is great beyond all comparison," adding "this judgment is certainly grounded on a standard that one presupposes can be

assumed to be the same for everyone, but which is not usable for any logical (mathematically determinate) judging of magnitude, but only for an aesthetic one, since it is a merely subjective standard grounding the reflecting judgment."[1] The judgments of the Mathematical sublime are reliant upon a system of measurement that has no logical basis. They are merely aesthetic. And, in Henry James's *The Ambassadors,* the figures of scale, measurement, and classification converge with those of the sublime. Though the sublime features in passages of a romantic ilk, its abyssal language also emerges in descriptions of relations, conversations, and impressions, which crucially do not produce the expected affirmations of subjecthood or epiphanic reflections. In addition, the novel seems equally interested in systems of classification, measurement, and scale. While these systems of understanding are meant to clarify and distill (which is the job of Maria Gostrey as Strether's European ward) they also introduce unexpected depth to the objects under their scrutiny.

In a previous paper, I argued that the sublime in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* represents the range of potential aesthetic experience and that knowledge works against this potential. Hinging my analysis on the sublime encounter in Gloriani's garden, I ascribed this passage outsized weight. However, upon further examination, James has multiple uses for the sublime in *The Ambassadors*. While the sublime does signal transformational moments in the narrative (as in Gloriani's garden), it also exists elsewhere upon the verbal surface: in descriptions of essences, impressions, and conversations—places where the sublime oughtn't be. How, then, do these countervailing forces of

[1]Kant, Immanuel, and Paul Guyer. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. p. 132-133

typification, the process of imposing novelistic limits, and the sublime bear onto problems of representation in James's *The Ambassadors*?

In a very basic sense, Gloriani's garden represents aesthetic potential. Written upon the face of the sculptor, Strether sees the plentitudes of aesthetic experience as a sublime object. The garden is thick with meaning, a barrage of signs, an "assault of images."[2] This is the language of the mathematical sublime: a given magnitude or density or multiplicity becomes "too thick for prompt discrimination,"[3] such that the subject's mind cannot grasp it. The claim that the embodied description of Gloriani's achievements is a specular sublime encounter in which Strether registers the infinite possibility of a life in art holds true. James writes, "With his genius in his eyes, his manners on his lips, his long career behind him and his honors and rewards all round," which reveals the infinite possibilities of an artistic life mapped onto Strether's double. Gloriani both shows Strether his own capacity for a life in art, yet exposes his distance from that ideal. However, this reading does not account for the sublime's repeated appearances throughout the novel. Perhaps this representation of the potential of aesthetic experience can be extrapolated into a metaphor for a formal problem.

Rather than merely prompting Strether to acknowledge this aesthetic potential, James instead prompts the reader to recognize the infinite possibilities confronting the novelist. Here, allegorically, Strether encounters the seemingly infinite potential of the unbounded novelistic surface. The novelist's task, according to James's aforementioned definitions, is to impose distinctions upon a field of infinite possibilities. To draw circles around relations "with a geometry of his own."[4] Notice James's strategic

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[2]James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p. 137
[3] James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p. 137
[4]James, Henry. *Roderick Hudson.* Introduction

use of empirical language and how it charges this scene with the paradoxical challenge of novelization: measuring the immeasurable. James writes,

> far back from streets and unsuspected by crowds, reached by a long passage and a quiet court, it was as striking to the unprepared mind, he immediately saw, as a treasure dug up; giving him too, more than anything yet, the note of the range of the immeasurable town and sweeping away, as by a last brave brush, his usual landmarks and terms.[5]

Strether, like James, has been thrust into the unfamiliar reaches of a new world in which his usual standards and terms have no meaning. They have both yet to learn its conventions, types, and values. Paris, to both James and Strether, is at some level immeasurable. The phrase "usual landmarks and terms" introduces geographic and, in narrative terms, spatiotemporal anxieties brought about by the immeasurable town. Indeed James's rendering of Strether's fellow party guests further corroborates the belief that Strether's anxieties are James's own: "His fellow guests were multiplying, and these things, their liberty, their intensity, their variety, their conditions at large, were in fusion in the admirable medium of the scene."[6] Rather than make a general claim, James opts to withhold specificity in favor of generic categorization. These terms, liberty, intensity, variety, and conditions, offer scales upon which people might be sorted, but simultaneously resist judgment, typification, or categorization. James himself is uncertain as to the extent of the social world in which his narrative is to be contained. His trepidation at taking on the seemingly impossible task of specification is here dramatized through Strether's anxieties of limitlessness. Where might James draw his lines? Upon meeting Chad's

[5] James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.137
[6] James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.136

intimates, Ms. Barrace and Little Bilham, James renders the uncertainty of Strether's position, noting that he has yet to adjust to the new gauges and standards of Parisian life. James notes "It was interesting to him to feel that he was in the presence of new measures, other standards a different scale of relations."[7] Strether's admission is James's own. Allegorically, Strether encounters the seemingly infinite potential of the unbounded fictional world. Just as Strether has yet to acquire a sense of these "new measures" of Paris, James, too, is beset with the task of determining the scale of relations in his novel. It is a problem that James must solve.

The extended use of classificatory language in *The Ambassadors* is evidence of its staging a pursuit of knowledge. In the narrative's terms, one of Strether's chief ambassadorial roles is to gather information on behalf of his fiancée, Mrs. Newsome. Her son, Chad, has abdicated his responsibilities as an heir to an industrial fortune in Woollett, Massachusetts, and taken up with a Parisian woman presumed to be of low social standing. It is Strehter's job to discover the nature of their relationship and to convince Chad that his best interests lie in Woollett. The charge of taxonomization and classification is prefigured long before Strether sets foot on the continent. Upon his arrival, Maria Gostrey functions as Strether's ward and confidant, a role which James classifies in his introduction as the *ficelle.* In his preface, James writes, "She is an enrolled, a direct, aid to lucidity."[8] As a *ficelle,* Maria becomes a foil against which Strether can pursue lucidity, but this pursuit is often indirect and not without its inherent contradictions. Crucially, it is Maria Gostrey who introduces Strether to the concept of 'types.' James writes Strether's reaction to Maria's exclamation,

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[7] James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.79
[8] James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. p.xliii

> 'Oh yes, they're types!'—but after he had taken it he made to the full his own use of it; both while he kept silence for the four acts and while he talked in the intervals. It was an evening, it was a world of types, and this was a connexion above all in which the figures and faces in the stalls were interchangeable with those on the stage.[9]

Such a concept, that there exists a variety of types into which people can be classified, raises several problems. For one, this passage suggests a fungibility of types: why are the faces in the crowd and on stage interchangeable and therefore equivalent? At its very introduction, James marks typification as problematically expansive: typification works against its intended purpose of discrimination in service of an undifferentiated totality. Perhaps Strether's "world of types" misses specificity because of its excessive scope.

Furthermore, this failure of typification occurs at an individual level. Maria's gestures of specificity helplessly capitulate to the general. Her classifications, terms, and types meet points of resistance at which they are checked. For example, when Gostrey classifies Mrs. Newsome, James writes, "'You mean she's an American invalid?' He carefully distinguished. 'There's nothing she likes less than to be called one, but she would consent to be one of those things, I think,'"[10] Within the confines of the term "American invalid," classification fails to hold Mrs. Newsome. While she may very well be an "American invalid," she resists its typifying tendency. Or, rather, she objects to the categorical stagnation of a type. In this passage, the very problems for which classification ought to be useful prove too expansive.

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[9]James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.36
[10]James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.39

Suppose the seemingly incompatible amalgamation of specificity and generality of the 'type' is in fact its foremost virtue? The type can both lay claim to generality and can also describe at the individual level of the instance. Gallagher writes, in her essay *The Rise of Fictionality*, that novelistic personae "carry the burden of type,"

> A fictional 'he' or 'she' should really be taken to mean 'you.' But in the case of many novel characters, even the "type" was generally minimized by the requirement that the character escape from the categorical in the process of individuation. The fact that 'le personnage… n'est personne' was thought to be precisely what made him or her magnetic.[11]

The type, as Gallagher contends, is both an individuated entity—as ensured by their name—as well as an instance, one among many.[12] Types are identifiable on the level of the singular case, at the level of character, but necessarily must seem generic enough to maintain their plausibility as fictive inventions. Literary types are born of repeated instances: characters who share generic similarities and yet are differentiated enough to suggest psychological depth. Again, Gallagher writes, "character's peculiar affective force, I propose, is generated by the mutual implication of their unreal knowability and apparent depth."[13] (356) Inherent to literary personae, and by extension, the types under which they are subsumed, is this moderation of generality and specificity.

Given this description, the passage which declares the theater a "world of types" and Ms. Gostrey's classification of Mrs. Newsome take on new significance. At once, they are held between generality and specificity—between individuality and deindividuation. The type must both relate cases

[11]Gallagher, Catherine. *The Rise of Fictionality*. 351
[12]Gallagher. p. 361
[13]Gallagher. p. 356

to and differentiate groups from the general. For instance, the theater as a "world of types" is a declaration of their necessary generality. Every face in the theater is presumed to be categorizable and therefore predisposed to typification. They must in some way retain an inherent differentiation despite their relation to the general. For Mrs. Newsome, the same is true: she would never consent to be called one, but she is yet another 'American Invalid.' Her resistance to this designation suggests an "apparent depth" while also tying her irrevocably to every other instance of the 'American Invalid.' She both resists typification and yet cannot do without it. In essence, the type ties the character to an expansive range of other instances of that type, and also operates at the level of the single case, accommodating expressions of their "apparent depth."

The sublime in this novel extends beyond the transformationally epiphanic realizations of potential. It is often used to describe things for which mere signification won't do. Take, for example, an account of Strether's reflections after Waymarsh's line of questioning at the conclusion of Book Eight.

> He felt indeed that he was showing much, as uncomfortably and almost in pain, he offered up his redness to Waymarsh, with a certain explanatory yearning. Something deep—something built on their old relation—passed, in this complexity, between them; he got the side-wind of a loyalty that stood behind all actual queer questions.[14]

This language of depth, of age, and the abyssal all constitute the hallmarks of the sublime. Still, the object of their description is not a classical sublime object, but rather a nebulous passage between two characters. An immaterial nonentity for which James must turn to the language of the sublime. If

[14] James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.277

realism is concerned with language's ability to make the world of fiction seem plausible to the reader, James's approach to these interactions is of another order. Modernism lends language to experiences that had otherwise eluded representation. In the above passage, James makes an earnest attempt to lend words to an experience that seems beyond the call of language: beyond measurement. Objects of the sublime, in a Kantian sense, defy our mental ability to represent or imagine their total scope, degree, or magnitude. James employs these signifiers of the sublime to make clear that this relation is at the very limits of literary rendering. In the case of Gloriani's garden, the sublime is used to signify the infinite potential of the novel, and, in this instance, James deploys it to explore the fringes of representable relations. James tests the border marked by a "geometry of his own," using sublime language to define its outermost edges.

This application of sublime language, as a way of defining the limits of the novel's relations, also demonstrates a clear attempt at typification and taxonomization. Despite the seeming immaterial or impalpable quality of the objects under examination, the desire to classify remains evident. Just as James defines the outer edges of his fictive surface with the language of the sublime, Strether pursues concrete definitions of his own. It would not be an extraordinary leap to say that relationships between characters are also subject to typification. Madame de Vionnet and Chad's relationship is the object of the most crucial categorization in the novel. Strether's pursuit of the truth leads to a series of evasions and misgivings. He initially assumes that Chad is in a relationship with Madame de Vionnet's daughter, Jeanne. And, to assuage Strether's concern, Little Bilham reports that the relation in question is classifiable as a "virtuous attachment." The meaning of this innocuous phrase is entirely uncertain; this terming of their relationship doesn't clarify matters. It is just a gauge, a bound within

which a relationship exists. While it places a meaningful distinction upon this relation and others of the like, it does not achieve absolute specificity. In Woollettian terms, "virtuous" might mean a sexless relation, but, crucially, he is now "in the presence of new measures, other standards a different scale of relations." Even after he is aware that the relationship is Vionnet and Chad's, his understanding of it is limited to an ignorant, unquestioning acceptance of Bilham's term, which, again, operates in a still-undefined system of scales. He is learning the terms, but he does not yet understand their significance. After the attachment is revealed to be sexual, Strether admits that he had "supposed nothing." The anticipated betrayal becomes a moment of concrete definition. In Strether's incapacity to suppose lies the complication with specificity in this novel: the pursuit of the truth requires empirical methods. In the process of novelization, the artist must define the scale of relations, but deciding how those relations might operate novelistically is crucially different. The phrase "virtuous attachment" is gesturing at a relationship, but the signifier's relation to the signified is determined entirely by the measures that indicate virtue. This categorization might be read as a move from generality to specificity. The movement from Strether's cluelessness, to the case of the "virtuous attachment," to its eventual revelation is a process of knowledge acquisition and an arrival at some form of specificity. If typification does not clarify ambiguity, what, then, is its literary value?

The process of typification, it can be argued, is where the artist must make their decisions. Just before the infamous rowboat scene, Strether encounters the countryside as an evocation of a Lambinet canvas he had seen in a gallery in the South End of Boston. Here, James stages the process of downscaling, of specification: Strether brackets the vast landscape within the bounds of a confined frame. James writes,

> He had gone forth under the impulse—artless enough, no doubt—to give the whole of one of them to that French ruralism, with its cool special green, into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the pictureframe. It had been as yet for the most part but a land of fancy for him—the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters;[15]

This passage likens the French countryside to an expanded version of the downscaled painting: Strether sees the world delimited. Crucially, though, James notes that this landscape had been for Strether "a land of fancy for him—the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters."[16] This uncontained landscape, this outstretched world, functions as the plane upon which the writer must impose their limits and determine their compositional vantage. In addition, the framelines of the painting echo James's "geometry of one's own" as two impositions of form. The landscape, the "background of fiction," is what works of art encircle, as suggested by James's use of the phrase "medium of art." But what of this relation between the landscape and the painting? The idyll loses none of its appeal through this comparison. On the contrary, it is enriched. The intrigue of this passage lies in the relation between the unfurled, extended landscape and the contained canvas. As readers, we are interested in the way Strether has arrived at this memory, and perhaps why the memory has taken over the perspective that occasioned it. Returning to the phrase, "background of fiction," one might take this to be an allusion to the implicit open world beyond the verbal veneer. It is that implicit expanse from which the fictive surface is derived. Crucially, Strether encounters the landscape in its

[15]James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*, p. 380
[16]James. p.381

mediated form: the Lambinet canvas is a distillate of the landscape upon which Strether now gazes. Strether then imagines a restaged encounter with the painting as it was in the gallery. James pens,

> It would be a different thing, however, to see the remembered mixture resolved back into its elements—to assist at the restoration to nature of the whole far-away hour: the dusty day in Boston, the background of the Fitchburg Depot, of the maroon-coloured sanctum, the special-green vision, the ridiculous price, the poplars, the willows, the rushes, the river, the sunny silvery sky, the shady woody horizon.[17]

His encounter with the French countryside becomes more interesting through its bounded double. The spatiotemporal stamps in Strether's memory lend the impression a greater intrigue, a more precise line of interpretation. James's move to impose a frame of his own on Strether's consciousness reveals the value of specification: the ongoing process of the solidification of terms and imposition of limits allows for the possibility of interpretation. While Strether encounters the unbounded "nursery of letters," his impression of it is most salient in the guise of the painting: a specified, limited, and, crucially, incomplete form. Gallagher writes that if the narrator-subject "actually created an impression of totality so strong that the incompleteness and disjunctions disappeared, there would be no inviting gaps for the reader to slip through, no subjective blanks to be overcome by her own idealized ego."[18] In essence, in the move from the multitudinous potential toward representation, the artist must necessarily sacrifice totality. In doing so, the novelist affords the reader license for interpretation. Strether's reflections on the Lambinet are a proposal for how the reader might engage with the forms

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[17]James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.381
[18]Gallagher, Catherine. "The Rise of Fictionality." *The Novel, Volume 1*. Princeton University Press, 2022. 336-. Web.

of typification throughout the novel. While these systematic pursuits of knowledge gesture at determination, they also work against complete totality in service of interpretation. They allow for gaps and slippages. The novelist's control of relational limits, the formal arrival at the determinate, necessarily leaves these "inviting gaps" in which the reader may impose their interpretations and pursue self-supplied readings of totality. The novelist's move from universality to specification makes the task of interpretation, as dramatised by Strether, possible.

Take, for example, the aforementioned revelation of the virtuous attachment. Strether's inability to make assumptions about the virtuous attachment is a function of the plasticity, not of the term itself, but of the signified meanings for which it stands. In Book Eleventh, the term takes on a new dimension. After Strether recognizes Mme. de Vionnet and Chad on their boat, it occurs to him that their attachment is sexual. The Parisian conception of virtue is markedly non-Woollettian. After Strether recounts this discovery, Gostrey asks him, "'What on earth—that's what I want to know now—had you supposed?' He recognized at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labor had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things."[19] One might be tempted to argue that this knowledge has merely led to another form of representational blockage, the sublime in miniature. But, importantly, James's use of the word "wonderful" as an alternative to the sublime should dissuade the reader from making this assumption. In their last conversation, Madame de Vionnet confesses "'I...should have liked to seem to you—well,

[19]James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.396

sublime'" to which Strether replies "'You're wonderful."[20] Wonderful becomes a stand-in for the sublime. It is this substitution that retrospectively clarifies Strether's post-boat scene reflection.

This move toward specification and determination gives rise to a set of questions rigorously grounded in the narrative fabric. Indeed, Strether's limited information described a relationship in the abstract. It isn't until this totalizing vision of a concrete relationship that Strether can offer interpretations in a totalizing gesture. These detached facets of the Chad-Vionnet relationship bear a resemblance to James's concept of the "geometry of his own" in that both cannot offer interpretive possibility without a suggestion of their implied depth. James states that the artist "*shall happily appear to"* encircle their fictive world with a geometry of their own. While he desires totality and yet he reluctantly acknowledges its impossibility. And though glimmers of totality shine through the verbal surface, it is the novelist's abandonment of total coverage, of marking limits, of allowing gaps, that makes interpretation possible. James's use of the sublime language to hint at that which is beyond the borderline of the represented world dovetails with his characters' ongoing classifications and pursuits of knowledge. These themes demarcate the bounds of novelistic possibilities with the promise of interpretive possibilities. Absolute comprehension and perfect distillation work against this notion of the reader needing "inviting gaps." While the novelist might strive for total coverage, their ambitions must conform to the bounds of the novel.

[20]James, Henry. *The Ambassadors.* p.410

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