

## HENRY JAMES'S MITIGATION OFFICE

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### ABSTRACT

The present article intends to highlight five propositions in the preface of Henry James's *The ambassadors* and compare their suggestions to the literary text. As a result, we will see how one of the most significant Jamesian novelistic effect, relativism, is linguistically based on the persistent use of modalizing locutions in both the preface and the novel, mitigating any categorical interpretation or statement.

**Keywords:** modalizing locutions, focalization, mitigation.

Henry James's authorial tentacles unfolded in many forms: short stories, novels, plays, biography, autobiography, essays of travel and literary criticism. Perhaps the abundance of his production reflects his conception about art and life: the embracing of multiple standpoints and, mainly, the refusal of a single, domineering, perspective.

Concerning his essays on fiction, it is noteworthy his commitment to discussions about art and the connection between literary form and meaning. Analyzing the bulk of his prefaces, which also disseminate these theoretical concerns, many scholars affirm that James wrote the terms for novel theory and its study. Dorothy J. Hale (1998, p. 79), for instance, argues that "Henry James's literary critical essays, especially the Prefaces that he wrote for the New York Edition of his fiction (1905-1907), have generally been regarded as the foundational documents for Anglo-American novel theory."

Having this in mind, we intend to compare five propositions in the preface of *The ambassadors* to its supposed fictional product. The preface, a paratextual material surrounding the literary work, functions occasionally as a preliminary system of rules shaping and consolidating the theory and structure of the text it precedes. By neither intending to sum up nor develop the fictional content, the preface is expected to present

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perhaps its methodology, subject, purposes and context – topics which would not coherently integrate into the main text. Owing to its relative autonomy, the preface not uncommonly violates the project defined by the subsequent novel.

The comparison between the prefatory propositions and the implemented fictional structure reveals the mitigation of statements. Based on the epistemic aspect of the modalizing terms, related to the hypothetical possibility of propositions being true or not true, it is possible to argue that one course leads to a pattern consistent with the novelistic information, making the reader see these ambiguous terms as a mere linguistic veneer. Instead, contradicting this vacuity, some modalized sentences in the preface give rise to inconsistent information by pointing to a deviant suggestion when compared to the novel.

This prose style is closely related to the Jamesian treatment of focalization, which, not only throughout this 1903 novel but also in its paratext, appears to prepare the reader for the equivocal nature of knowledge by keeping away from definite truths and judgments. In this sense, James surreptitiously calls attention to his technique of selecting information alternatively in the novel and to his oblique method of elucidation in the preface, tingeing both speeches with modalizing locutions – exemplified with *perhaps*, *probably*, *as if*, *seem* and *appear* by the French theorist Gérard Genette (1983).

This configuration of James's writing style – the regulation of narrative information mitigating inflexible points of view – may be related to a narrative process called mood by Genette in *Narrative discourse: an essay in method*, first published in English in 1980. The modality mood comprises the study of distance and perspective or, in other words, it deals with the ability of the narrative to provide more or fewer details and to adopt (or seem to adopt) the participant's vision or point of view. One of the concrete linguistic means of investigating the mood of a novel is the presence of modalizing locutions.

The narratologist reminds us of previous studies concerning this subject, according to which the modalizing locutions constitute the alibis of the novelist by allowing the narrator to state speculatively what he could not affirm without breaching the restriction of the narrative field to a character's point of view – the internal focalization. This way, the novelist imposes “his truth under a somewhat hypocritical

cover, beyond all the uncertainties of the hero and perhaps also of the narrator” (GENETTE, 1983, p. 203).

Genette classifies both *What Maisie knew* and *The ambassadors* as internal focalization novels and, in this sense, it wouldn't be inappropriate to highlight that, in the latter, the abuse of modalizing terms seems to put an extra effort in the constant dislocation of a focal guide.

By less revealing other characters' minds and more evading the reflector, such breaches, in the novel, allow for an ambiguous Strether and a biased narrator. In the preface, the modalizing locutions indicate dubiously two possible compositional choices subject to authentication during the reading of the novel. This postponement of a permanent position brings forth the mitigating ideas of instability and uncertainty.

The first proposition selected conveys an arrangement in harmony with the nature of the novel, thus turning the epistemic terms “would” and “may” into an empty customary phraseology:

One would like, at such an hour as this, for critical licence, to go into the matter of the noted inevitable deviation (from too fond an original vision) that the exquisite treachery even of the straightest execution may ever be trusted to inflict even on the most mature plan – the case being that, though one's last reconsidered production always seems to bristle with that particular evidence, “The Ambassadors” would place a flood of such light at my service (JAMES, 1998, p. xlvi).

The modalizing expressions prevent, at first glance, any assured statement on the plan of the artist, stimulating questions about the nature of such deviation and treachery. The reader so far does not have enough information to determine if the author is evoking his narrative plan in advance or merely bringing to mind one of his unfulfilled intentions, a blossom “dropped by the way” – as metaphorically expressed by James.

After reading the novel, it is possible to see that the mentioned deviation permeates both the plot level, because the ambassador Strether will contradict the original purpose of his mission, and the linguistic stratum, since words such as “deprave”, “bewilder” and “awkward” mean etymologically corrupt, lead astray, in the wrong direction.

Besides, Julie Rivkin's *The logic of delegation in The ambassadors* elucidates that literality is the linguistic form of fidelity Strether is attempting to convey in his

mission. The ambassador, however, is constantly drawn away from it towards figurative language. His unsuccessful effort to fix words to referents provokes ambiguity, suggesting “both the infidelities of language toward the experience to which it supposedly corresponds and the possible promiscuities harbored in the novel’s relationships themselves” (RIVKIN, 1986, p. 823).

The artistic pattern of focalization also reveals the idea of divergence: “It was as if he had found out he was tired – tired not from his walk, but from that inward exercise which had known, on the whole, for three months, so little intermission” (JAMES, 1998, p. 383). Due to “as if”, the passage does not state directly that his poor friend is exhausted with reflecting, a vagueness that could reveal the narrator is making partial assumptions about Strether. The reader not only remains ignorant of the reflector’s capacities, but also of his chronicler’s authorization for entering thoughts.

In this sense, the deviation from “an original vision” cited in the preface is actually an idea that infiltrates deeply the storyline, words origin, figurative language and the divergence from an exact reflector.

The second passage reinforces Strether’s ambiguities and paves the way for the innumerable omissions concerning his intentions and feelings. In a sense, the character does not seem subject to his author: “There would have been of course the case of the Strether prepared, wherever presenting himself, only to judge and to feel meanly; but *he* would have moved for me, I confess, enveloped in no legend whatever” (JAMES, 1998, p. xxxvii).

The discordant understandings of his personality are emphasized by the combination of vagueness, relating to the modalizing “would”, and certainty, expressed in “of course” and “confess”. The questions we may raise involve the possibilities of a hypocritical Strether, disguised as the poor creature his narrator fabricates, and of an author masking ironically his own definite literary design.

When Strether first visits sculptor Gloriani’s house for a garden party, for instance, the ambassador at a certain point is left musing alone while talking to his host. His suppositions are thus brought to the reader:

Did the artist drop him from having made out that he wouldn’t do? He really felt just today that he might do better than usual. Hadn’t he done well enough, so far as that went, in being exactly so dazzled? and in

not having too, as he almost believed, wholly hidden from his host that he felt the latter's plummet? (JAMES, 1998, p. 139).

This excerpt shows a less oblique moment of self-speculation: Strether considers the reasons for which he was left alone and thinks he maybe acted in disagreement with the set of behavioral rules inherent to that mysterious environment. Free indirect speech and its partial liberation from the grip of the narrator convey Strether's kind concern and wish to please – dissimilar from that insinuation of meanness.

The idea of an unkind Strether, however, is also made possible. In a walk with his friends Gostrey and Waymarsh, Strether talks about Waymarsh to Gostrey when he is away at a shop: “Yes, and talking to you as I do. I've known you a few hours, and I've known HIM all my life; so that if the ease I thus take with you about him isn't magnificent' – and the thought of it held him a moment – ‘why it's rather base” (JAMES, 1998, p. 30).

The element responsible at this moment for launching a dubious light into Strether is the direct speech of the protagonist himself. In the process of gathering information about his traits, Strether and the narrator provoke the reader to compare his declared baseness to other instances of his judgment and feeling, as mentioned in the preface. Coherently emphasizing the mitigation process, his speech is alleviated by the modalization term “if” and thus an unequivocal portrayal escapes through suggestion.

It is worth noting also the countless metaphors centered on the semantic field of theater throughout the novel. Such reminders reinforce that the figures and faces are “interchangeable with those on the stage” (JAMES, 1998, p. 36), implying perhaps that it is more a question of dissimulation than meanness.

By comparing that prefatory passage to such considerations, it is possible to see that Strether is enveloped, at least, in the legend of ambiguity and indefiniteness. The subsequent remark about Strether in the preface – which intends to contradict the belief that he possibly judges and feels meanly – states that his note is the note of discrimination. However, to underline his ability to recognize differences is not to clarify how he does it, be it meanly or kindly. This way, both the preface and the novel set in motion the effect of abysses of attenuated information.

The third passage selected still investigates the narrative techniques employed in the conception of Strether. The author affirms that a mature hero would make possible

accumulated character and thickened motive, features that represented a firm novelistic postulate: “Nothing resisted, nothing betrayed, I seem to make out, in this full and sound sense of the matter; it shed from any side I could turn it to the same golden glow” (JAMES, 1998, p. xxxii).

Although the subject of resistance and betrayal are unclear, it is inevitable to compare this passage to that dissonant consideration: an inevitable deviation the “exquisite treachery even of the straightest execution may ever be trusted to inflict” (JAMES, 1998, p. xlvi). In this case, as previously said, Strether performs a role of deviation and betrayal to a commanding figure, contradicting the prefatory comment.

On the other hand, this emphatic structural glow perhaps alludes to the focalization pattern that focuses primarily Strether’s mind and, in a secondary degree, encompasses other centers of attention. The literary modalizing terms are one of the linguistic clues that lead the reader through the autonomy of the characters and the narrator for expressing their thoughts.

The Jamesian conception of art, according to which “Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of stand-points” (JAMES, 1981, p. 49), penetrates mainly through the modalizing locutions in *The ambassadors*. This regulating focalization oscillates in approaching and moving away from Strether’s and the narrator’s consciousness.

It wasn’t till after he had spoken that he became aware of how much there had been in him of response; when the tone of her own rejoinder, as well as the play of something more in her face – something more, that is, than its apparently usual restless light – seemed to notify him (JAMES, 1998, p. 3).

This sequence of information instigates the ambassador’s air of mystery by showing a gradual detachment from his mind: it starts with his awareness of his manners of communication, skips to the suggestion in Gostrey’s face and directs the narrative to the modalized final sentence. This excerpt exemplifies a process mentioned by Genette (1983) characterized by the emphasis on modalizing words as indicators of focalization which reveal the types of focalization shifts worked out by 20<sup>th</sup> century writers.

It is worth remembering that such uses of modalizing terms in internal focalization narratives only seem to indicate a focal infraction. When the narrator of *The ambassadors* delivers an ambiguous speech concerning Strether's own thoughts, feelings and ideas, his mind is still the undetached center. Instead of pointing to breaches, cases such as "seemed to notify him" are the linguistic hints that balance artistic information and make it impracticable for the reader to select between "hypocritical" and "poor" as a designation for Strether.

In addition to these moments when the reader is at least intrigued by the seemingly indiscriminate use of modalizing terms, some statements also reveal their function as reducing agents of the author's commitment to his artistic methodology. On behalf of the "grace and effect and allure", James makes allowance for the insolence of the story, likely to be "caught by us with its tongue in its cheek". It seems then that the author makes room for the possibility of misleading statements. Indeed, again in the preface, the author discusses the invariable attachment to Strether's standpoint:

The thing was to be so much this worthy's intimate adventure that even the projection of his consciousness upon it from beginning to end without intermission or deviation would probably still leave a part of its value for him, and *a fortiori* for ourselves, unexpressed (JAMES, 1998, p. xxxix).

We would like to draw attention to two pieces of information in this passage: first, the projection of Strether's consciousness without intermission and, second, its unexpressed value.

Initially, the author talks about the supposition that Strether's standpoint would represent the undeviating position from which the narrative is told. This structure could be an illustration of that alluded impudence. Since the novel is filled with focal breaches which both project someone else's consciousness and hide the reflector's thoughts, the modalizing locutions should be read as attenuating expressions weakening the author's responsibility for such promises.

It is possible that such tongue-in-cheek disobedience may lie in the composition of focal infractions, which emphasizes the impossibility, in a Dostoyevskian way, to cope with a single philosophical and epistemic perspective. Such considerations relate, for instance, to Dr. Biljana Nesic (2007)'s remarks on spatial perception in her article

*Cityscapes – A re-reading of Henry James’ The ambassadors*. In distinguishing the focalization code, Nescic implicitly alludes to this ambiguous pattern: she refers to Strether’s perspective as “the exclusive one” and later to the “(almost) single perspective” of the novel. Genette’s modality of mood answers, as far as we are concerned, to this apparent irresolution.

When the narrator states, for instance, “*She* saw, however, still other things, though in an instant she had hidden them” (JAMES, 1998, p. 85), the reader notices a momentary betrayal of this general code. Strether’s mind is left behind and the narrative brings to light the omission of Maria’s thoughts. This way, the internal focalization is briefly altered to the omniscience of the classical novelist. *The ambassadors* is filled with deviations like this, giving more information “than is authorized in principle in the code of focalization governing the whole” (GENETTE, 1983, p. 195). This process was christened *paralepsis* by Genette (1983).

The same pattern is seen when the narrator explains “She had turned her back on the dream that Mrs. Newsome’s rupture, their friend’s forfeiture – the engagement, the relation itself, broken beyond all mending – might furnish forth her advantage [...]” (JAMES, 1998, p. 417). Such occurrences of *paralepsis*, which leave Strether at the threshold of others’ awareness and show an excess of information, also underline the moments when the narrator seems all-powerful and all-seeing.

In the second place, when the author conceives the unexpressed value of the ambassador’s mind, he projects the moments of omission in the novel. For instance: Strether’s motives for drawing his hands out of Maria Gostrey’s arms as they approach the inn are portrayed obliquely and through modalization.

If he drew it out again indeed as they approached the inn this may have been because, after more talk had passed between them, the relation of age, or at least of experience – which, for that matter, had already played to and fro with some freedom – affected him as incurring a readjustment (JAMES, 1998, p. 14).

Omissions like this seem to refute a protagonist that holds no surprise for the reader, a possible disadvantage of the internal focalization scheme. In order to portray an intriguing character, the author then turns to the process of *paralipsis*. According to Genette (1983, p. 196), *paralipsis* in the internal focalization narrative describe the



omission of “some important action or thought of the focal hero, which neither the hero nor the narrator can be ignorant of but which the narrator chooses to conceal from the reader.”

In this sense, the novel is indeed the portrayal of an intimate adventure that leaves parts of its value unexpressed both for the characters and the reader. The absence of intermission, however, is a topic to be discussed considering the all-pervading deviation pattern and perspectival relations that come to mitigate propositions.

The fifth prefatory passage selected underlines indeed the deviation scheme of the novel. When talking about Strether’s nationality and its possible narrow localism, the author indicates that “one had really but to keep under the lens for an hour to see it give up its secrets” (JAMES, 1998, p. xxxv), a piece of information which seems to disagree with the fact that the ambassador is described as “grandly cynical” and “grandly vague” (JAMES, 1998, p. 419) by Maria Gostrey.

In this sense, the narrative also opens up a breach for the unreliable narrator, which, according to Booth (1983), does not speak for or act in accordance with the norms of the work, that is, the implied author’s norms. The clash happens when the narrator’s interferences depicting Strether as pitiful face the focalization infractions that reveal a less gullible or inattentive protagonist. Thus the implied author is the agent allowing the confrontation of such divergences, a position that highlights the ambassador’s fragmentary aspect.

Thus it is clear that James exposes his compositional mitigations and fragmented realities by means of modalizing terms in both the preface and the novel. This structure coherently matches the subject the narrator will be dealing with: the portrayal of a dubious mind that reiterates oblique abysses of information and escapes continuously through the ambiguous focalization.

Moreover, the possible allusion to Hans Holbein’s anamorphic painting *The ambassadors* (1533) also provokes the reader to question an unvarying code of representation and categorical statements. The potential intertextuality with this imprecise perspective or projection indicates beforehand the necessity of considering and reflecting on the novel the way we do with the painting.

James lived in a moment of both relativism and rediscovery. In the arena of science, we may evoke the works of Hendrik Lorentz and Thomas Edison dealing with

scientific suppositions and achievements. In the field of arts in general, the rising tendency for perspectival relations can be found in the Cubist movement and in the plays of Johan Strindberg, for instance.

Perhaps this novelistic dynamics of mitigation in *The ambassadors* warning against apparent, superficial interpretations represents this communal instability and relativity, preventing the reader after all from taking any appearance for granted.

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## O OFÍCIO DE MITIGAÇÃO DE HENRY JAMES

### RESUMO

O presente artigo busca destacar cinco ideias no prefácio do romance *The ambassadors*, de Henry James, e comparar suas sugestões ao texto literário. Como resultado, veremos como um dos efeitos romanescos jamesianos mais significativos, o relativismo, é baseado linguisticamente no uso constante de locuções modalizantes tanto no prefácio quanto no romance, mitigando qualquer interpretação ou frase categórica.

**Palavras-chave:** locuções modalizantes, focalização, mitigação.

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