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PRAGMATISM IN THE AMBASSADORS

"Then I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have unconsciously pragmatized".¹ That Henry James should be the author of this comment (in a letter to his brother William) seems startling in an age which is familiar with the pejorative connotations alone of the term 'pragmatism'. Perhaps the only significance of the remark is that which William James' biographer assigns to it of representing "an extension of that admiring pride with which (Henry) had from childhood viewed all of William's superior attainments".² But a close look at *The Ambassadors* suggests that Henry Parkes, in an article on "The James Brothers", might have been nearer the truth when he wrote that "the main effort of Henry James was to convey by means of an appropriate aesthetic form a view of life essentially similar to that which William expressed in philosophy".³ What are the similarities between the philosophy of pragmatism and *The Ambassadors*, and what implications do they have for an understanding of this complex work?

The novel begins with the phrase "Strether's first question" and continues to record the process through which Strether discards false impressions, is betrayed by misconceptions, and arrives, finally, at a new perception of truth. In the Preface, James remarks that "the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision".⁴ It is here that the striking resemblance can be found to the pragmatic theory of cognition which was expounded by William James in 1907 and by Charles Peirce before him.

There is no evidence in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, or in Henry James' notes or letters, to indicate a conscious attempt to dramatise his brother's theory; but there is evidence to suggest that the two brothers, grow-

ing up in the philosophic atmosphere created by their father, shared an interest in ideas. Thus it would not be surprising if James absorbed, though perhaps unconsciously, the main tenets of the philosophy which in his day was already displacing the Emersonian transcendentalism that dominated the years of the first major American writers.

Pragmatism, William James insisted, was a method only—a method of attaining truth. His forerunner, Peirce, in an essay "The Fixation of Belief" which appeared in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1877, proposed the theory that man had two states of mind: one was belief, which he defined as a "comfortable habit of mind"; the other was doubt, a negative state of uneasiness from which one tried to escape into belief. The only immediate motive that man has for changing a belief, Peirce felt, was the "irritation of doubt". A firm belief, whether true or not, satisfies. If premises are not doubted at all, they cannot be more satisfactory than they are.

The novel illustrates these two contrasting states in its two sets of ambassadors. Sarah Pocock never doubts her premise that any woman who would have an extra-marital affair must necessarily be a horror and an insult to all women. Nor does she doubt that such an attachment could bring anything but harm to her brother. Strether, on the other hand, as the first phrase of the novel indicates, arrives in Europe in a state of doubt. Questions continue to dominate his uneasy mind. The eagerness with which he responds to Miss Gostrey, the impressions he receives on the walk on the Chester wall, and the guilt he feels at enjoying his experience attest to his dissatisfaction with Woollett and its "failure to enjoy". Though Strether becomes increasingly aware of a dichotomy between himself and Waymarsh, the projection of Woollett, he affirms his premise to Miss Gostrey that Chad's woman must be "base, venal, out of the streets", and that Chad is thus a "wretched boy" who could not possibly be refined by such an experience. Yet when he meets Little Bilham and sees Chad's apartment, his subconscious dissatisfaction with his other mode of life is great enough to make him take an instant liking to Chad's friend and express admiration for Chad's possessions. After Chad appears in person, Strether is, as James points out in one of his rare interventions, "again and again thrown back on a felt need to remodel somehow his plan". (104) In fact, he is so impressed by Chad's wonderful manner that he fails to appreciate Miss Gostrey's warning that Chad is "not so good as you think". (108) When she suggests that the young man "does really want to shake her off", Strether gasps, in horror: "After all she has done for him?"

In true pragmatic fashion, Strether judges in terms of the consequences of an action. The premise of the venal woman is on its way to being replaced by a new habit of mind, a new belief, even before Strether meets Mme. de Vionnet.

The learning process followed by Strether is that which William James insisted was the true route of cognition. Sensuous experience was, to this radical empiricist, the basis of all perception. In *The Ambassadors*, verbs of seeing and looking and metaphors of sight and light are in constant use. In fact, Miss Barrace confesses: "I do, we all do here, run too much to mere eye. . . . We're all looking at each other—and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That's what the light of Paris seems always to show". (126) And as Leon Edel has pointed out, Strether does not correct Little Bilham when late in the book the young man substitutes the word "see" for "live" and reminds Strether that the older man had instructed him to "see all you can". Sensuous apprehensions, such as those gained in Gloriani's garden, in Notre Dame, at Chad's dinner, and beside the river, form the basis of Strether's changing viewpoint. But the sense impression is refracted, as William James maintained, through the imagination and the habitual routes of thought. In his essay "What Pragmatism Means" James stressed the backward path of man's cognition as well as the forward impulse to think in terms of consequences. According to James, "in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives"—so much so that the new idea "preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification". In fact James felt that "the most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing". The older truths thus control the new belief.

The importance of memory in the novel dramatises this conception, as does Strether's progress through what he regards as the "maze of allusions". (165) When his original premise of the "venal woman" proves untenable, Strether jumps at Little Bilham's statement that Chad's relation is a "virtuous attachment". But Strether interprets "virtuous" in the light of his New England Puritan background and sets out to make appearances suit this new belief—which fits his habit of thinking that a good result must have had a "moral" cause. Chad's dinner impresses Strether again with the young man's improvement and with Mme. de Vionnet's charm; as a result, in his conversation with Miss Barrace, he misses all the signs that would indicate his misconception. "It's innocent", he replies to her. "I see the whole thing". (158) James continues: "That was what he had settled to as an indirect but none the less closely involved consequence of his impression of Jeanne. That was where

he meant to stay". Later the same evening, when Strether misinterprets Little Bilham's remarks, James repeats: "But he knew, once more, as we have seen, where he was, and his being proof against everything was only another attestation that he meant to stay there". (166)

In his essay "The Fixation of Belief", Peirce pointed out that even an incorrect belief which is "steady and immovable" yields great peace of mind. He compared man to an ostrich which buries its head in the sand to hide danger, "then calmly says there is no danger; and since it feels perfectly sure there is none, why should it raise its head to see?" The scene in Notre Dame demonstrates this process. After recognising Mme. de Vionnet as "the person whose attitude before the glimmering altar had so impressed him" (174), Streeter muses:

This attitude fitted admirably into the stand he had privately taken about her connection with Chad on the last occasion of his seeing them together. It helped him to stick fast at the point he had then reached; it was there, he had resolved, that he *would* stick, and at no moment since had it seemed as easy to do so. Unassailably innocent was a relation that could make one of the parties to it so carry herself. If it wasn't innocent why did she haunt the churches?—into which, given the woman he could believe he made out, she would never have come to flaunt an insolence of guilt.

Sarah Pocock, treated to the same sense impression, would obviously not have agreed with Strether's conclusion.

Yet what Strether has arrived at is a belief again in line with his habit of thought, the moral code he has brought with him from Woollett. As he analyses the relationship between Chad and Mme. de Vionnet, he tells Little Bilham that they have "accepted their situation—hard as it is. They're not free—at least she's not; but they take what's left to them. It's a friendship of a beautiful sort; and that's what makes them so strong. They're straight, they feel; and they keep each other up". (168)

Strether's contentment with the false belief weathers the storm of Sarah Pocock's absolutist challenge. But it cannot withstand the directness of the sense impression Strether receives on the river when the little Lambinet he has been searching for all day becomes complete with the appearance of the boat and its two occupants. Yet again his response to the situation is a further extension of his original moral sense. Though finally disillusioned with Chad, and to a lesser extent with Mme. de Vionnet, he still insists that Chad would be "not only a brute" but "a criminal of the deepest dye" (336) if he deserted her for America.

Strether's own decision, the conclusion of the novel, has given rise to the most adverse critical response, even by the novel's admirers. It is here that a reading of *The Ambassadors* in terms of its pragmatism is of the most help. Instead of viewing it (with F. O. Matthiessen) as a negative renunciation, or having to see it as an unconvincing proof of what another critic calls a "morality higher than the conventional",⁵ Strether's actions can be interpreted as further proof of William James' contention that the influence of the older truth is "absolutely controlling". To a pragmatist, an action must be evaluated, not on moral grounds, but as a part of the cognitive process. Thus the novel is affirmative, in that Strether has learned to penetrate sham and hypocrisy even when they appear under the guise of beauty, art and refinement. Though he now sees Chad more accurately, his perception of the grace and warmth of Europe remains true and is not cancelled out by the corruption and sterility which is also a reality there. But while he has learned much, his connection to the old habit of thought remains, as it must, in his adherence to the Puritan code with which he has lived so long and which would deny him a reward for failing to carry out a trust. Thus he tells Maria Gostrey that "to be right", his "only logic" is "Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself". (344)

Here James is being true to Strether's American background as well as to pragmatic theory in picturing the prison of the Hebraic New England conscience from which perhaps he, no more than Strether, could never totally free himself. Mrs. Newsome, the mysterious and unseen character who dominates the novel from off-stage, and to whom Strether returns, is an apt symbol of the continuing force of old habits of belief. This conception of her is suggested even in the Notebooks where James refers to Strether's dead wife as "replete with New England conscience" and to the widow to whom he is engaged as being "of the strenuous pattern . . . the reflection of his old self".⁶ Nevertheless, Strether's return to America is, as he says, a return "to a great difference". The difference is not, however, a freedom from the Woollett point of view; yet because Strether has gained a perception of truth which unites appearance and reality, he is free of the intolerance and narrowness of that view. The great difference is that Strether has discovered the pragmatic basis of conduct—the self; he is no longer dependent on either Mrs. Newsome or Maria Gostrey.

Except for this, it seems as if the pragmatic process was merely the long way around to the conclusion from which the absolutists started, even though

James has done his work so well that by the time the reader recognises Strether's mistake the truth of the Pocock-Newsome assumption has become a superficial sidelight to the real issue, namely, the quality of human existence in an age when conventions cannot be taken for granted. The disturbing fact remains, however, that man cannot rely on the accuracy of his sense impressions any more than he can on the products of his reason. He may have the illusion of freedom, but, as Strether says, it seems as if he were really poured like helpless jelly into a tin mould composed of his past experience and environment. (132)

Thus despite the many parallels with pragmatic theory, *The Ambassadors* lacks the note of optimism found at that time in the new and uniquely American philosophy. In fact, the novel seems to prefigure the course of American thought in the twentieth century from optimistic pragmatism to despairing existentialism. Yet all the while, this very American novel remains firmly placed in the main literary tradition of America in its perception of the darkness, the uncertainty, and the essential loneliness of life.

NOTES

1. Percy Lubbock (ed.), *The Letters of Henry James* (New York, 1920), II, p. 83.
2. Ralph B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Harvard, 1948), p. 337.
3. Henry Parkes, "The James Brothers", *Sewanee Review*, 56 (1948) 326.
4. Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (Norton, New York, 1964), p. 2. Further references to this novel will be to this edition and will be contained in parentheses in the text.
5. L. M. Cecil, "Virtuous Attachment in James' *The Ambassadors*", *American Quarterly*, 19 (1967) 724.
6. Henry James, "Notebook Entries", in *The Ambassadors* (Norton), pp. 373 and 374.