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The Disruption of the Feminine in Henry James

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CHAPTER ONE

The Realist/Referential Construct

The problems that *The Turn of the Screw* poses to a Realist reader are largely generated by efforts to explicate, and hence to limit, femininity and absence. The parallel movements in the tale, apparent in the narrator's and Douglas' attempts to confine the governess and in the governess's attempt to confine absence, suggest that the two processes are linked. I would suggest that the link between the two derives from the ways in which both femininity and absence work to subvert Realism's overt effort to depict 'life' referentially. Indeed, the 'presence' of femininity and absence foreground the absence of referential knowability and emphasize the inherent instability of language. Realism does not acknowledge this instability, although it slips in to Realist theorists' efforts to define the literary mode. The very texture of James's essays provides a case in point, for as he strives (particularly in his later years) for clarity and precision in conveying his literary views, his writing becomes increasingly obscure and diffuse. James's characteristic parenthetical approach to clarity results, conversely, in obscurity, a situation which perhaps implies that clarity in language is unattainable.

It is difficult to derive from James's writings any clear understanding of what he means by the term 'Realism.' That he considers himself a Realist, in name at least, is apparent throughout his essays, but he never explicitly defines what he means by that appellation. In this, he is like many theorists of Realism, who also hesitate to offer a definition of the mode because of its amorphous nature. Often, summaries of Realism begin with their authors' admissions of the difficulties they have encountered in explicating the subject. Nonetheless, although

Realism is a notoriously slippery concept, there are still certain conventions that have come to be accepted as characteristic of it. These are summarized by William W. Stowe in *Balzac, James, and the Realistic Novel,* when he suggests that texts deemed to be Realist are 'fictionalized narratives that set out *systematically* (i.e., consciously and intentionally) to represent the world as their readers see it, that describe and interpret social, political, and economic systems in the process of the representation, and that seek to establish themselves as complex literary systems our response to which resembles our response to the world' (xii).

Stowe draws attention to Realism's mimetic efforts, stressing how the mode strives for a realistic representation of life. Yet Charles Rosen and Henry Zerner point out in *Romanticism and Realism* that such a definition is too broad. They assert that 'Realist' has too often been confused with 'realistic,' and that nineteenth-century Realism 'was a very much more narrow affair' (139). As they suggest, Realism, as an artistic movement, began in France in the middle of the nineteenth century and manifested itself primarily in the visual arts and in literature. As an aesthetic doctrine, Realism dictated that any aspect of life was suitable for a novel, as is clear in Stendhal's famous Realist pronouncement that 'a novel is a mirror journeying down the high road. Sometimes it reflects to your view the azure blue of heaven, sometimes the mire in the puddles on the road below. And the man who carries the mirror in his pack will be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror reflects the mire, and you blame the mirror! Blame rather the high road on which the puddle lies, and still more the inspector of roads and highways who lets the water stand there and the puddles form' (366).

Realism's subject matter was to be culled from banal, everyday scenes and situations, and the beauty of its artistic representation was to be found in its form. As Zerner and Rosen suggest, 'If contemporary life was to be represented with its banality, ugliness, and mediocrity undistorted, unromanticized, then the aesthetic interest had to be shifted from the objects represented to the means of representation' (149-50). The concept of form in a Realist aesthetic insisted upon accuracy of representation, which was to be effected through the ostensible removal of the author or the downplaying of the authorial voice. In addition, it required a logical and consistent plot and delighted in meticulous detail. Realism purports, therefore, to offer an objective and accurate representation of life as it is, not as the author might wish it to be. However, in representing life accurately, Realism relies upon

a doctrine of what we might call 'knowability' (as discussed in the Introduction), since for the Realist, what is seen can be known, and what is known can be articulated and imparted to others through the medium of language. This reliance upon 'knowability' is integral to the Realist belief that literature contains an essential 'truth' about 'life,' and that the Realist novelist can present 'reality' in such an objective and detailed fashion that all readers will recognize the validity of their own - and the author's - vision. Initially, this seems like a straightforward enough mandate, but as James's essays indicate, Realism, even in its theoretical form, is much more contradictory and limiting than its theorists would allow, and the incoherences and convolutions of James's essays point to the rather more arbitrary and amorphous nature of the mode.

In probably the most famous paragraph in all James's criticism, located in 'The Art of Fiction,' written in 1884, the author attempts to impart his Realist beliefs. He insists that the form is an attempt to mirror 'life' in art:

> I am far from intending ... to minimise the importance of exactness — of truth of detail. One can speak best from one's own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel — the merit on which all its other merits (including that conscious moral purpose of which Mr. Besant speaks) helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist. They are his inspiration, his despair, his reward, his torment, his delight. It is here in very truth that he competes with life; it is here that he competes with his brother the painter in *his* attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle. (53)'

This passage reveals James's most basic Realist preoccupations: he believes that the novel must produce the 'illusion of life' and suggest

1 All references to James's essays, unless otherwise indicated, are to *Henry James: Literary Criticism,* ed Leon Edel and Mark Wilson, 2 vols.

the variety of 'the human spectacle,' and that these are achieved, to some extent, through detail. The events related in a novel must appear to be 'real' events - in which case, presumably, they would impart the 'air of truth' because they would unfold logically, 'the way things happen.' Authorial intrusions are therefore anathema to James, since they detract from the 'air of reality' by reminding the reader that the related events are fictional. James is horrified with Anthony Trollope's 'suicidal' intrusions into his texts, and in 1883,* he complains of the earlier writer's 'little slaps of credulity': 'It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regard himself as an historian and his narrative as a history. It is only as an historian that he has the smallest *locus standi.* As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere; to insert into his attempt a backbone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real' (1343).

The 'illusion of life' must be maintained at all costs, and readers are to be brought to believe that what they are reading is 'real' or like the 'real.' The art of conveying this 'illusion' lies in relating fiction as if it were history or a series of detailed facts. In 1879, James applauds Hawthorne because he 'rather supplements than contradicts history' (369), and he stresses in the Trollope essay that novelists must consider themselves historians. Yet in his 1873 review of *Middlemarch* (a work which he believes is a 'very splendid performance' and 'sets a limit... to the development of the old-fashioned English novel' [965]), he draws a dividing line between novel and history when he observes that this book is, in its 'diffuseness,' 'too copious a dose of pure fiction. If we write novels so, how shall we write History?' (965-6). While 'diffuseness' is a quality more of form, perhaps, than life,'James seems to be suggesting that the scope *of Middlemarch* is too broad, and consequently, that its profuseness, or the extent of its detailed portrayal, bears too much resemblance to history. Therefore, it seems that while the novel must mimic history, if the historical likeness is carried too far, the novel encroaches onto history's ground. Since there is a ten-year gap between this review and the Trollope essay, it could be argued that the contradiction is the result of an authorial change of mind; however, the contradiction is never acknowledged or addressed, and indeed, it is only one of a series of contradictions that permeates James's essays. For example, how must the novel be like history yet not be too much like history? The distinction between 'copiousness' and some implied norm of narrative is difficult to explain and, at least at first glance, seems to be an arbitrary and confusing discrimination. In later essays, James maintains his position that novels should affect the manner of history, and proceeds as though he had never placed a restriction on the extent to which they do so. What is suggested here, then, is the elastic nature of James's Realist criteria, which appear to be expandable and even contradictable.

James elides the above contradiction, to some extent, through his insistence that an author must understand 'life' in order to portray it. Hence, a novel's lack of the right measure of history may be due to the author's insufficient understanding of the world. In a small essay entitled 'The Science of Criticism,' written in 1891, James explains that the quality of the writer's mind vivifies the work: 'art - the best kind, the only kind worth speaking of, is the kind that springs from the liveliest experience' (98-9). While this may appear to be an open and unlimited mandate, again it quickly narrows, for one must have knowledge only of a particular kind of 'life.' All 'realities' are not suitable for a novel, and a novel, for James, can be too 'realistic'James's primary criticism of Zola, in 1880, is that he portrays too much of 'nature' and too little of 'life's' finer aspects: 'M. Zola holds to mean nothing and to prove nothing. Decency and indecency, morality and immorality, beauty and ugliness, are conceptions with which "naturalism" has nothing to do; in M. Zola's system these distinctions are void, these allusions are idle. The only business of naturalism is to be - natural, and therefore, instead of saying *of Nana* that it contains a great deal of filth, we should simply say of it that it contains a great deal of nature' (866). James dislikes Zola for presenting 'foulness rather than fairness' (866) and pleads that 'realism should not be compromised. Nothing tends more to compromise it than to represent it as necessarily allied to the impure' (867). This would seem to be a rather anti-Realist statement, since most definitions of Realism purport to accept any lorm of 'life' as potential material for fiction. For James, however, 'taste' comes into play in selecting the writable 'reality,' and he berates Zola for his lack of it: 'The real has not a single shade more affinity with an unclean vessel than with a clean one, and M. Zola's system, carried to its utmost expression, can dispense as little with taste and tact as the floweriest mannerism of a less analytic age' (867-8).

2 I am not treating James's essays in a chronological fashion primarily for reasons of clarity, since James returns to his conception of Realism throughout his career and expands upon different aspects at different times. However, as the Prefaces attest, the paradoxes within his Realist outline do not result merely from time or from change on James's part. The paradoxes, as well as the ambiguities which are evident in the essays, are frequently reiterated in various ways and various forms and thus apparently exist within James's theory itself.

The essay on Trollope, which James produced in 1865, constitutes a further convolution in his concept. In it, he applauds Trollope for his 'purpose... of being true to common life' (1313) - apparently Trollope's common life is superior to Zola's - but he adds a further stricture when he queries whether common life is the same as human nature, and is uncertain whether Trollope 'is equally true to nature; that is, whether in the midst of this multitude of real things, of uncompromisingly real circumstances, the persons put before us are equally real. Mr. Trollope has proposed to himself to describe those facts which are so close under every one's nose that no one notices them. Life is vulgar, but we know not how vulgar it is till we see it set down in his pages' (1313). James's reasoning here is intriguing, for he immediately associates 'common life' with vulgarity, an association which suggests that for him, only an aristocratic or genteel 'reality' is acceptably 'real.'

In 1884, James returns to his idea that a writer must have a fine mind, and stresses that 'the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer' ('Art' 64). The best novel, therefore, will display the right 'kind' of knowledge of 'life,' a kind which will enable it to present a 'tasteful' reflection of the 'real.' Trollope's and Zola's works apparently lack this quality, and their lack of taste muddies their picture. Indeed, James decides in 1903 that 'there is simply no limit, in fine, to the misfortune of being tasteless; it does not merely disfigure the surface and the fringe of your performance - it eats back into the very heart and enfeebles the sources of life. When you have no taste you have no discretion, which is the conscience of taste' ('Zola' 888). Zola, who 'to the common ... inordinately sacrifices' (891), renders a narrow picture of'life,' for he depicts only 'the manners, the morals, the miseries - for it mainly comes to that - of a bourgeoisie grossly materialised' (889). The novel requires a larger - or more tasteful - scope in order to reproduce a fully rounded 'reality.' Therefore, literature's subject cannot be *anything* drawn from 'life,' in so far as it cannot be too 'real' or too 'copious' or too 'vulgar,' but instead should expurgate 'life.' James is concerned with filtering and controlling the 'reality' that will be represented in fiction, and indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that the novelist must retain a 'cautious silence upon certain Subjects' ('Art' 63): In the English novel (by which of course I mean the American as well) more than in any other there is a traditional difference between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know, that which they see and that which they speak of, that which they feel to be a part of life and that which they allow to enter into literature. There is the great difference,

in short, between what they talk of in conversation and what they talk of in print' ('Art' 63). The 'reality' that writers *'allow'* to enter into fiction is not necessarily the 'reality' they perceive. Art portrays, in fact, censored 'life,' since there is a difference between what is appropriate for a novel and what is not, that is, a difference 'between that which [we] know and that which we agree to admit [we] know.' This difference may account for art's improving upon 'life,' for art allows us to leave out those parts of 'reality' we do not like to admit.

However, if a novel must censor 'life,' it must be careful to censor it in the right way, and James criticizes de Maupassant, in 1888, for eliminating the wrong things from *Une vie:* 'It is almost an arrangement of the history of poor Mme. de Lamare to have left so many things out of it, for after all she is described in very few of the relations of life' (544). It would seem that what de Maupassant 'leaves out' is the 'reflective' side of his characters (547), and for James, that 'part which governs conduct and produces character' (547) should never be omitted, for the 'carnal side of man appears the most characteristic if you look at it a great deal; and you look at it a great deal if you do not look at the other, at the side by which he reacts against his weaknesses, his defeats' (548). James is always emphatic in his assertion that the novel has no 'conscious moral purpose' ('Art' 62). However, the moralism he disclaims is apparent in his disapproval of excessive treatments of 'man's carnal side' because he believes that any excess unbalances the picture of'life'; yet he never acknowledges that too much emphasis on 'man's' moral and spiritual side is equally excessive and leads to a similar unbalance. It should be noted that James's very specific and rather (at least to the modern mind) squeamish notions of the *acceptably* 'real' are individual to him and are not shared by all Realist theorists. What becomes clear in James's critiques of others' attempts at Realism is the intensely subjective nature of the 'life' that he finds novelistically suitable. This is curious, in that he seems to think he is being objective in his criticisms.

If James has qualified what images of'reality' can be incorporated into fiction and thus has limited the idea that a writer can choose a subject from 'life,' it is because he believes that certain 'realities' are too 'particular' (ironically, perhaps, like his own). He suggests that this problem can be resolved through the selection of a character who is representative and general, and so deserving of the treatment accorded him or her. In 1884, he notes that representative characters are superior, since 'they give one the impression of life itself, and not of an arrangement, a *rechauffe* of life ... This is the great strength of his

[Turgenev's] own representations of character; they are so strangely, fascinatingly particular, and yet they are so recognisably general' ('Turgenev' 1023). James criticizes Dickens for making his characters too 'particular without being general' (1023), and he also dislikes Flaubert's subject in *Madame Bovary.* In a discussion of that novel, James applauds Flaubert for his novelistic skill and treatment (in this essay, produced in 1902, he calls Flaubert the 'novelist's novelist' [346] but notes that Flaubert's title character is not representative enough and so does not merit her position in the novel: 'Our complaint is that Emma Bovary, in spite of the nature of her consciousness and in spite of her reflecting so much that of her creator, is really too small an affair ... When I speak of the faith in Emma Bovary as proportionately wasted I reflect on M. Faguet's judgment that she is from the point of view of deep interest richly or at least roundedly representative. Representative of what? he makes us ask even while granting all the grounds of misery and tragedy involved. The plea for her is the plea made for all the figures that live without evaporation under the painter's hand - that they are not only particular persons but types of their kind, and as valid in one light as in the other' (326-7). James's masculinist bias is apparent here, since he never considers that Emma may be representative of bourgeois, romance-trained *women.* He does, however, continue to assess novels on the appropriateness of their subject matter and, in 1833, decides that Trollope has the right subject matter, for his texts reveal 'a complete appreciation of the usual' (1333) which enables him to paint people just as they are' (1333). But Trollope differs from Flaubert, for while he can excite 'the impression of life' (1337), he is unable to treat it artistically because he 'has no visible, certainly no explicit care for the literary part of the business' (1347). Clearly, there is a mysterious correlation between selection and taste, and treatment and form, which are all of equal importance in the composition of a Realist work. Fortunately, in 1899, even James admits that there is a 'secret' (110) involved in the combining of form and idea. He believes that the English novel has lacked form, and requires it to 'rekindle the fire' ('Future' 11 o) of literary interest.

Form is of utmost importance to James, and he believes that a novel's form should evince an 'organic whole'; it should successfully treat its subject and reach a unified conclusion. However, closure is difficult to achieve if the novel is a mirror of'life' because in 'life,' '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. He is in the perpetual predicament

that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it' *(Art* 5). These lines of questioning emphasize the difference between art and 'life,' since art is framed and 'must close,' whereas 'life,' which it reflects, never ceases. The novel 'must end' and work toward a unified and logical 'completion,' but it must suggest a continuity if it is to effect the 'air of reality.' For James, the difficulty of confining the novelist's picture of'life' is linked to the difficulty of suggesting its completeness: 'To give the image and the sense of certain things while still keeping them subordinate to his plan, keeping them in relation to matters more immediate and apparent, to give all the sense, in a word, without all the substance or all the surface, and so to summarise and foreshorten, so to make values both rich and sharp, that the mere procession of items and profiles is not only, for the occasion, superseded, but is, for essential quality, almost "compromised" - such a case of delicacy proposes itself at every turn to the painter of life who wishes *both to treat his chosen subject and to confine his necessary picture' {Art* 14; emphasis mine). The basic tension between treating and confining is stressed in this passage, which points to the constructed nature of the Realist picture.

In an early essay on the novels of George Eliot, published in 1866, James acknowledges the problem of closure in Eliot's works, and he suggests that one way to mitigate the problem is to let the reader do 'quite half the labour' (922). He continues to allude to a 'secret' (922) in how to manage this: 'until it is found out, I think that the art of story-telling cannot be said to have approached perfection' (922). Of course, the 'problem' in allowing a reader to contribute to the continuity of a Realist text is that the writer ostensibly loses control.[3] This 'solution' therefore works against both a unified meaning and closure because each reader will add to the text in a different way, depending on how he or she interprets it. Thus, the more freedom the reader is allowed, the more the 'problem' is intensified, for any acknowledgment that meaning resides (to any degree) in the reader supports the idea that texts cannot achieve closure.

The essays cited are only a few of the many which focus on the

3 According to a post-structuralist theory of language, this is a control which is limited in the first place, since the ambiguities and contradictions within the language ot any text cannot be finally resolved and will not be 'restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading' (Betsey 104).

ways in which novelists can and should effect the 'illusion of life' in their texts. Although James's own fictional works tend to be rather selective or 'aristocratic' in the nature of their subjects, they do represent an attempt, as James professes, to mirror 'life'; they are seemingly detailed and objective, promise closure, and convey the belief that what can be seen can be articulated and known. However, his fiction, like his essays, displays all the inherent problems to which the limitations and strictures of his theory of Realism give rise. If Realism is an inherently slippery concept, it is also a rather unstable concept, even by traditional definitions, because it assumes that author and reader have a shared knowledge of 'truth' and 'reality,' and chooses to ignore the necessarily arbitrary nature of its own particular perception of'life.' In its implicit assumption that 'truth' can be known and articulated by the author and then recognized by the discerning reader, Realism also gives rise to too many unaddressed questions - questions about the limitations of the fictional frame and the artistic manipulation of the 'reality' reflected within it - to be considered as unproblematic or self-evident.

The contradictions apparent in James's essays point, in a sense, to the arbitrariness at the heart of the Realist mode. The vagueness that occurs within the seeming specificity merely underlines the fact that Realism's intentions cannot be realized, and strongly suggests that Realism, while it is a literary mode with certain conventions, can no more accurately render 'truth' and 'reality' than can any other art form. Indeed, as with his fiction, James's criticism serves only to prove that Realism, despite its apparent 'naturalness,' is perhaps the least coherent and natural of literary theories. There have been many studies which trace the ways in which the Realists construct their pictures of'life' and manipulate readers into believing that they are accurate depictions. But language, as *The Turn of the Screw* and James's essays indicate, is not transparent, and its opaqueness and self-reflexivity throw into question the concept of referentiality. Nor are Realism's pictures of'life' truly 'natural' and 'given,' since they are devised in such a way that they generate an aura of familiarity with which readers are supposed to identify and to accept.Through the implicit hierarchization of certain privileged characters, readers are directed toward the single universal 'truth' that realism aims to depict, a 'truth' they are expected to recognize and share. Yet surely this is assuming a great deal, for readers do

not all read in the same way or reach the same conclusion, and this situation makes closure exceedingly problematic.[4]

The convolutions evident in James's essays have always been apparent to readers. Recent theoretical work has merely foregrounded the indeterminacies and provided a new language in which to discuss them. What has sometimes led readers and critics to overlook such contradictions, however, is their own subscription as readers to the aesthetic of Realism and its attendant philosophical perspective. I would suggest that Realism is more a critical construct than the description of an actual literary practice. What are called Realist texts may display Realist characteristics, sometimes in varying degrees, but they also, as we have seen in *The Turn of the Screw,* display other characteristics that have been ignored by Realist/humanist critics, or at least by those critics who believe novels to be mirrors of 'life,' and who thus seek to find a single unified meaning within them. As with other forms of artistic representation, Realism's 'air of reality' is constructed, and what is perhaps most notable about the mode is its philosophical underpinnings, underpinnings that have confined Realist artistic representations within a limited definition.

Realist critics and theorists (and in this category I would include Realist novelists writing as critics) rarely assess Realism on its objective depiction, or its authenticity of portrayal, but instead focus on its representation of'truth.' Tony Tanner, for example, can decide that American fiction 'tends to start from a closely perceived sub-social or non-social reality and attempts to move towards some sort of metaphysical and philosophical generalization' (337). However, this metaphysical and philosophical generalization can be located, and in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism,* George J. Becker draws attention to it when he notes that the rise of Realism runs parallel to the rise of positivism:

> Realism came into being in the ferment of scientific and positivist thinking which characterized the middle of the nineteenth century and was to become what Zola always spoke of as the major current of the age. Realism really did constitute a fresh start because it was

4 For further explications of how Realism generates its 'illusion of life,' I refer the interested reader to works like Antony Easthope's *British Post-Structuralism,* Gerard Genette's criticism, Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice,* Alison Lee's *Realism and Power,* Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* and the critical writings of Roland Barthes.

> based on a new set of assumptions about the universe. It denied that there was a reality of essence or forms which was not accessible to ordinary sense perception, insisting instead that reality be viewed as something immediately at hand, common to ordinary human experience, and open to observation. This attitude demanded that its readers and adherents abandon a host of preconceptions about human nature, about the purposes and mechanism of the universe, and above all about the role of art. (6)

While the ascendancy of positivism generated Realism's belief that all the world could be known and explained, the prioritization of science threw into question notions of 'truth' and universality. Realism, presented as a depiction of the 'life' we all recognize, becomes a means of justifying a standard of morality and a means of ensuring a certain civility. To some extent, it took the place of religion as a homogenizing power. Matthew Arnold, for instance, believes that literature (in more general terms) can extend and affirm a particular system of values which we all supposedly recognize and share, for 'books and reading may enable a man to construct a kind of semblance ... in his own mind, [of] a world of knowledge and intelligence in which he may live and work ... it may be a means of preparation for such epochs, it does really constitute, if many share in it, a quickening and sustaining atmosphere of great value' (13-14).

Realism, at least in Britain and North America, becomes an extension of liberal humanism (which I am also calling 'Realist/humanism'). As a philosophy, liberal humanism has its roots in the Renaissance but becomes the dominant mode of thought in the Victorian period. It is grounded in the idea that 'man' (and I use this term deliberately) is governed by rational autonomy and expresses confidence in 'his' ability to shape 'his' life and world *(Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 4:69-72). The problem with this philosophical view is, in Michel Foucault's words, that humanism 'is a theme or, rather, a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in European societies; these themes, always tied to value judgments, have obviously varied greatly in their content, as well as in the values they have preserved. Furthermore, they have served as a critical principle of differentiation ... From this, we must not conclude that everything that has ever been linked with humanism is to be rejected but that the humanistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection' ('What' 44).

I.ike Realism, liberal humanism is another amorphous concept, and

its indeterminacy, not surprisingly, also lies in its conception of'truth' - not in theory, but in practice. In theory, liberal humanists contend that 'truth' is universal and shared; in practice, however, in liberal-humanist writings, 'truth' varies according to the demands and desires of the critic. For example, where for Tony Tanner, the 'truth' of American literature is located in its metaphysical and philosophical generalizations, for George Lukacs, it lies in how well literature depicts and furthers socialism: 'All this argues the superiority - historically speaking - of socialist realism ... The reason for this superiority is the insights which socialist ideology, socialist perspective, make available to the writer: they enable him to give a more comprehensive and deeper account of man as a social being than any traditional ideology' (115). Obviously, Tanner's and Lukacs' 'truths' differ, and while this is not to suggest that the two critics are wrong in their assumptions, it does provide an example of the difficulties one encounters in trying to define Realism as a value commodity.

Indeed, these difficulties can be seen clearly displayed in the Wellek-Greenwood debate in *Neophilologus* (1961-2). Rene Wellek, who dislikes Lukacs' 'truth,' reacts against his writings and attempts to define Realism as a period-concept. He admits that 'the theoretical difficulty of realism, its contradictoriness, lies in this very point [that a "completely truthful representation of reality would exclude any kind of social purpose or propaganda"] ... There is a tension between description and prescription, truth and instruction, which cannot be resolved logically but which characterizes the literature of which we are speaking' (11). He then defines what he believes are the *conventions* of the mode. Greenwood contends that Wellek largely ignores the fact that Realism often 'lies in the artistic rendering of a universal truth about human nature' (90). Wellek denies the charge that he has ignored the 'truth' of the Realist text, and responds that Greenwood has only offered yet another definition of Realism (195). He asserts that the 'whole shifting concept of realism as presented by Mr. Greenwood is, on the one hand, far too narrow as it excludes anything that is not "normal", "rational", and "moral" from good art and, on the other hand, is far too wide for use as it obliterates all distinctions between styles and periods by identifying "realism" with truth, with the universal, with good art in general' (195). What becomes clear in this exchange is that neither critic can comprehensively define the term because each relies upon (unacknowledged but) arbitrarily defined notions of'value' and 'truth' in order to do so.

This method of defining and valuing texts as Realist results in a

debate over whose ideological 'truth' is truer. I am using the term 'ideology' in this particular context to denote a set of common beliefs, those things which appear 'natural,' 'given' 'commonsensical' at a particular time. As Catherine Belsey asserts, common sense within what we call 'liberal humanism' offers a 'way of approaching literature not as a self-conscious and deliberate practice, a method based on a reasoned theoretical position, but as the "obvious" mode of reading, the "natural" way of approaching literary works' (2). That being so, the supposedly 'objective' literary form becomes a highly subjective mode in the hands of its critics and theorists, for it relies on the assumption that the reader shares the author's vision and understanding of life; this sharing then becomes a 'guarantee ... of the "truth" of the text' (69) and also reaffirms both author's and reader's positions as 'knowing subjects] in a world of knowing subjects' (69).

There are other ways to read, however, and in recent years, humanism has been problematized by those who find its strictures limiting. Belsey's reference to subjectivity foregrounds one of the primary criticisms levied against humanism, that found in the work of Louis Althusser, who has done much to decentre the notions of Cartesian rationality - especially the idea of the thinking, knowing being which governs humanist beliefs. Subjectivity is the focus of Althusser's famous essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.' Here he discusses the ways in which ideology works to 'interpellate' or 'hail' its subjects, allowing them to believe they have the freedom to choose their fate while incorporating them into and subjecting them to its own particular views. As Althusser suggests: 'I only wish to point out that you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects. The writing I am currently executing and the reading you are currently performing are also in this respect rituals of ideological recognition, including the "obviousness" with which the "truth" or "error" of my reflections may impose itself on you' (161-2). By highlighting the effects of ideology, Althusser problematizes the autonomous subject of Cartesian thought by showing it to be, in fact, conflicted and split. He also demonstrates how literature can be, and has been, used to support and reaffirm humanist ideology, and so becomes another subjected and subjugating agency.

Ideology also plays an important role in Pierre Macherey's thinking in *A Theory of Literary Production,* another work that undercuts the idea that Realist/humanist 'truth' is 'natural' and 'given.' Macherey

examines Realist texts in a manner recalling Althusser's theory, but rather than focusing on the ways in which the reader is interpellated as subject, he argues that Realist texts are faithful in their attempt to depict 'reality' and hence faithful in inscribing the *gaps* within the 'reality' they ideologically construct:

> We always eventually find, at the edge of the text, the language of ideology, momentarily hidden, but eloquent by its every absence. This parody quality of the literary work strips it of its apparent spontaneity and makes it a secondary work. Through the diverse modes of their presence the different elements conflict more than they unite: the 'life' kidnapped by everyday speech, the echo of which is found in the literary work, confronts that speech with its own unreality (which is attended by the production of an effect of reality); whereas the finished literary work (since nothing can be added to it) *reveals* the gaps in ideology. Literature is the mythology of its own myths: it has no need of a soothsayer to uncover its secrets. (60)

Macherey contends that if texts are exemplars of their own ideology, then in faithfully depicting the world as they perceive it, they will foreground the limitations of their ideology, since the gaps they evince will offer a critique of their own conscious project. For example, representations of women, particularly in nineteenth-century fiction, manifest all the ambivalences and indeterminacies projected upon them through the nineteenth-century humanist ideology embedded within the texts.

Realist texts may be products of ideology which seek to incorporate readers into their belief system, but readers can choose to break with a text's particular ethos. The work of Roland Barthes demonstrates how readers can locate and then dislocate a text's ideological codes. In *s/z,* Barthes describes the delight readers can experience in a 'writerly' or plural text. He contends that language has been confined and restricted within humanist interpretations that work toward a single meaning. The text might invite such a reading, but it will also subvert it, for it will generate more than one meaning: 'To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I unname, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor. - With regard

to the plural text, forgetting meaning cannot therefore be seen as a fault' (1 1). Barthes, who clearly rejects univocal readings, gives priority to the reader's freedom and, at the same time, foregrounds the ideologically constructed nature of Realism and its 'universal truths.' However, while Barthes focuses on the ways in which the texts generate different meanings, he does not specifically locate the source of the instability of meaning in the signifying system of language, as does Jacques Derrida. Derridean deconstruction poses the most radical break with humanism, for it undermines the Realist/humanist belief that the world is knowable and that language is referential.

Derrida concentrates on the interrelationship of absence and presence, a situation discussed in my reading *of The Turn of the Screw.* From a Derridean perspective, language is not referential; it refers to nothing outside of itself, and thus it is not a fixed entity but manifests a slide, for it effects an endless deferral of meaning. Meaning is generated through a play of differences[5] that decentres the ideologically constructed norm. In *Of Grammatology,* Derrida contends that 'through infinite circulation and references, from sign to sign and from representer to representer, the selfsameness *propre]* of presence has no longer a place: no one is there for anyone not even for himself; one can no longer dispose of meaning; one can no longer stop it, it is carried into an endless movement of signification' (233—4).

Where for structuralists, meaning is established through a series of binary oppositions (good/evil, male/female, black/white), for Derrida and other post-structuralists, meaning is present only through what becomes a hierarchical signifying system. A word does not signify in and of itself; its meaning rests upon what it is 'not' to generate its presence. Therefore, metaphysical presence, or the idea that something exists in itself, is undercut. Presence is constituted only through a play, or trace, of what Derrida calls 'differance': 'The first consequence to be drawn from this is that the signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences. Such a play, then - differance - is no longer simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general' ('Differance' 140).

5 This draws on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of difference, which asserts that 'a language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others' (114).

Derrida contends that that which 'is' exists through that which it 'is not.' What is linguistically absent, therefore, is as significant as, if not more significant than, what is linguistically present, and it can be used to subvert and disseminate the impetus of the signifying system. Within a Derridean framework, signification is effected through the precedence granted one concept over another. In order for a norm to be established, there must also be present, as an absence, that which the norm is not, that which effects the absence of what the norm metaphysically and ideologically constitutes. However, if that which is not the norm is described as an opposite, or as an 'other,' then it actually decentres the posited signification, in that the norm relies upon an absence for its existence. And if it exists only in opposition to this absence, then it has no presence *in itself,* as referential or humanist thought would assert. Presence and absence determine and undermine each other, and signification is perpetually deferred.

While this study is largely concerned with the ways in which James's texts subvert their explicitly Realist, nineteenth-century ideology, it focuses on one of the particular means by which they do so. Clearly, Realism, because it is an aesthetic ideology, will be bound by those limitations. And in the nineteenth century, this binding is largely apparent in the texts' self-reflexive attempts to bind women. Drawing on the work of Colin MacCabe, Antony Easthope highlights the masculinist precepts of Realism: 'Realism is masculinist... because it is a form of fetishism, that being an especially male prerogative ... a masculine desire to disavow the lack of the Mother's phallus by erecting an apparently self-sufficient (textual) reality in its place' (139). This masculinism - even without its psychoanalytic trappings - is apparent in James's writings. We have seen it at work in the author's dismissal of Emma Bovary as a suitable subject for a novel, and the idea that women are inferior underpins James's writings. For example, in a review of Nassau W. Senior's *Essays on Fiction,* published in the *North American Review* in 1864, James speaks of how art is appreciated only by mature readers. He laments the incredulity of'young persons' (very quickly identified as 'young women') and notes that only when they mellow with age will they become more accepting of fiction. He writes that, as a woman grows older, 'she will be plunged in household cares; her life will have grown prosaic; her thoughts will have overcome their bad habits. It would seem, therefore, that as her knowledge of life has increased, her judgement of fiction, which is but a reflection of life, should have become more unerring' (1198).

The assertion that the more one knows of 'life,' the more one can

accept a fictional account of it seems harmless enough on the surface, but beneath the surface lurk what are in fact sexist and elitist assumptions, assumptions that find ideological expression in Realist texts. In her perceptive treatment of women in French Realist novels, Naomi Schor draws attention to Realism's exclusion of women as well as its need for them: 'realism, far from excluding woman from the field of representation, draws its momentum from the representation of bound women, and that binding implicitly recognizes woman's energy and the patriarchal order's dependence on it for the production of Literature' (144). She goes on to note that 'Realism is that paradoxical moment in Western literature when representation can neither accommodate the Otherness of Woman nor exist without it' (xi).

The paradox that Schor notes relates back to the 'determining' presence of absence discussed earlier, in reference to Derrida's work. Derrida, too, suggests that Woman is necessary because she is Other, and he addresses her Otherness in *Spurs:* 'There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself. Out of the depths, endless and unfathomable, she engulfs and distorts all vestige of essentiality, of identity, of property. And the philosophical discourse, blinded, founders on these shoals and is hurled down these depthless depths to its ruin. There is no such thing as the truth of woman, but it is because of that abyssal divergence of the truth, because that truth is (untruth). Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth' (51). Derrida's work not only illuminates the play of signification found within James's texts, then, but also points to why women are so closely linked with writing, which is a plural exercise. 'Woman' is a plural construction; indeed, it must be plural if it is Other, or in Derrida's words 'untruth,' since the Other has no singular presence within itself. As a result, it can and will subvert what is posited as a presence because it is an absence. There is a complication within Derrida's writings, however, for Woman does not necessarily equal women, or rather, when Derrida speaks about Woman, he is not necessarily referring to the female sex. As he notes, 'Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth' (51). For post-structuralists, gender is constructed within language, and hence, 'Woman,' or what I will call 'the Feminine' to avoid confusion, does not simply refer to female-gendered subjects. While this makes the Feminine difficult to locate specifically, it also opens the construct to include anything which falls into that Other space. The Feminine works against the singular impetus of 'the Masculine,' which is located in the referential desire for coherence. In its passive resistance to the Masculine, the Feminine

decentres the presence which the Masculine attempts to impose. What I am tracing, then, are linguistic movements, one active and the Other passive. But the Feminine, in its passivity, disrupts the singular meaning the Masculine seeks to impose.

The theoretical work of certain French feminists comes into play here in illuminating how the Feminine works in opposition to the Masculine norm. From this perspective, the sexism that underpins humanism is apparent in the Masculine text's singular, coherent, and logical 'thrust' toward coherence. Luce Irigaray argues that Woman (or the Feminine) is the source of plurality, for ' "she" is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious ... not to mention her language, in which "she" sets off in all directions leaving "him" unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand' (28-9). Therefore, for Irigaray, what 'he' is, 'she' is not, and her plurality has been perceived as incoherent, incomprehensible, hysterical because it cannot be explained within a singular system. Irigaray gives precedence to Feminine plurality and breaks with the idea that singularity is achievable, or even desirable.

In a similar fashion, Helene Cixous explores the ways in which the Feminine has been trivialized and marginalized as a result of its relegation to a passive Other space, a space that is necessary to the singular system, in its function as Other. She suggests that, as a result, Woman (or the Feminine) 'does not exist, she can not-be; but there has to be something of her. He keeps, then, of the woman on whom he is no longer dependent, only this space, always virginal, as matter to be subjected to the desire he wishes to impart' (65). As Cixous indicates, the space can be subjected, but it also works to decentre the Masculine referential effort. The Feminine disrupts this referentiality because it does not signify a fixed presence. Its signification slides — it is always that which the norm is not, but as such it is many things. Ideologically, because biological women have been constituted linguistically as Other and occupy the space of the Feminine, they have been regarded as incoherent and hence stand in direct opposition to Masculine linear logic. Thus, the linguistic structures I have foregrounded have direct bearing on ideological perceptions of 'reality.' The Feminine is a space which is not exclusive to women, but it is a space which they frequently occupy, a space that, from a logical perspective, has been trivialized and suppressed. However, for Cixous,

the incoherence of the Feminine proffers multifold possibilities, and this, for her, engenders an interesting question: 'Now it has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallocentrism - bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial - to threaten the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural, by conjuring up from femininity the reflections and hypothesis that are necessarily ruinous for the stronghold still in possession of authority. What would happen to logocentrism, to the great philosophical systems, to the order of the world in general if the rock upon which they founded this church should crumble?' (65).

Figuratively, it is the crumbling of the church that we see in James's texts. In them, the singular effort to contain and limit language is subverted, and Feminine polyvalency, in upsetting the singular thrust of the Masculine text, renders the texts plural and polyvocal. Biological gender breaks down here, as I have suggested, and James's own masculinity does not restrict his writing to a singular economy, for as Julie Kristeva suggests, the Feminine is not a biological specification but is found in the nature of writing: 'In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. There are certain "men" who are familiar with this phenomenon; it is what some modern texts never stop signifying: testing the limits of language and sociality - the law and its transgression, mastery and (sexual) pleasure - without reserving one for males and the other for females, on the condition that it isjofver mentioned' ('Woman' 137-8).

For/RristevaSthe gendered subject is constructed within language, and any writing'that depicts certain crises and subverts coherence is Feminine. The slide that language effects, that which renders it Feminine, leads Alice Jardine to contend that a 'man becomes a woman *(devient femme)* when he writes, or, if not, he does not "write" (in the radical sense *oiecriture)* what he writes, or, at least, does *not know* what he's writing' (58). Writing itself is plural, and as James's texts will demonstrate, it cannot be limited within a single, or logocentric, system. In James's writings, the Feminine is frequently located in female characters, but it is not restricted to them and is also often found in the plurality of writing and textual production (I will discuss this further in Chapter 3). As a result of this, writing becomes a manifestation of the Feminine, or that which cannot be confined. Post-structuralist theories, therefore, illuminate James's texts, since they provide a means of analysis, an explanation of the subversion that is always already there. The crisis in James, that split between the text's conscious referential project and its subversion of it, points to the plurality of language, for it results from the text's reliance upon absence to invoke presence, and the absence, or the space of the Feminine, becomes the source of the textual multiplicity.

The multiplicity within Realist texts has generally been ignored by Realist/humanist critics, who follow the overt codes embedded within the texts and attempt to invoke closure by creating a single, coherent picture. Yet through their readings, the paradoxes apparent within Realist theory are thrown into relief, for this mode of reading results, in fact, in arguments over which is the reading that will 'correctly' account for them. Realist/humanist critics like F.R. Leavis and Van Wyck Brooks have suggested that there is something lacking in James's late works, since they more overtly frustrate Realist/humanist attempts to confine them. However, from my perspective, the apparent ease with which such critics have managed to invoke closure in James's early novels becomes suspect. Therefore, this study begins by examining a selection of the early works with a view to opening them to analysis, before moving to the novels of the Major Phase. In the analyses of *Roderick Hudson* and *The Portrait of a Lady,* the discussion concentrates on the ways in which Christina Light and Isabel Archer function as social critiques. Using the theories of Pierre Macherey and Louis Althusser to trace the ways in which Realism is constructed, the chapter explores the problematics generated by the text's Cartesian underpinnings. Chapter 3 focuses on a selection of James's short stories, initially examining the female characters as the source of the textual incoherence and then moving into an exploration of how writing itself is shown to be a plural process and hence an inherently Feminine endeavour. In the analyses of the Major Phase novels, the plurality of the Feminine is directly linked to writing and reading. This endeavour explores the ways in which the texts themselves refuse to be confined within the arbitrary limitations that both James and his early critics have placed upon them.

Oddly enough, while more and more critics are reading James from a contemporary theoretical perspective, the disruptive force that is manifested in representations of the Feminine has been largely ignored. The connection between women and writing, which we have seen in *The Turn of the Screw,* and which recurs in the texts selected for examination, finds its source in Feminine plurality, a plurality that deconstructs the overt and singular impetus of the Realist Masculine text. Such is the result of woman's traditional signification as the Feminine Other, and it is her Otherness that this study explores.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ambassadors and Feminine Reading

Like *In the Cage, The Ambassadors,* published in 1903,[1] is a Feminin text that frustrates Masculine efforts to close and limit it. Indeed, th referential problems to which the Feminine gives rise are fort grounded in *The Ambassadors,* since it more actively privileges plurahti In light of this, the critical response to the novel is interesting, fc the work effects diametrically opposed views. Paradoxically, it is bot lauded for its unity and condemned for its multiplicity. Intriguingl; the multiplicity that critics discover within the text has its source i language, for it is largely generated by James's late style. While on would expect that because of their technical innovations the late nove would elicit ambivalent responses from early twentieth-century critic this is not the case, and generally, the more prominent early criti< find *The Ambassadors* successful and praise its technique. Beach, i particular, writing fifteen years after the novel's publication, finds th; it evinces a 'tone of large and sociable speculation upon human natun a tone at once grave and easy, light and yet deep, earnest and yet frc from anxiety. It is the tone, most of all, of the leisurely thinker, wel assured that maturity can be the product only of time. And what \ offers us are fruits well ripened in the sun of his thought' (270).

While Beach praises the novel's tone, Lubbock celebrates James dramatic technique. Indeed, he goes so far as to assert that *TheAmbassi*

1 I will refer to the New York Edition in my discussion of the Major Phase, since 1 am trying to demonstrate how the late works delight in multiplicity, a situation which 1 believe becomes more apparent in the last edition of the novels, and editii which James felt represented his final intentions.

dors is the consummate example of an integrated novelistic form when he writes that there is 'no further for it [the novel] to go' (171). His enthusiasm is apparent in his chapter on *The Ambassadors,* which he concludes as follows: '*As a whole* the book is all pictorial, an indirect impression received through Strether's intervening consciousness, beyond which the story never strays. I conclude that on this paradox the art of dramatizing the picture of somebody's experience - the art I have been considering in these last chapters - touches its limit' (170).

These early interpretations are in accord with the author's own assessment, for James finds *The Ambassadors* to be 'frankly, quite the best "all round" ' of his 'productions' {*Art* 309). James's satisfaction with the text derives from the centre-of-consciousness method he employs, a method which, he believes, allows for intensity and unity. He decided to employ this technique, he writes, because it 'would give [him] a large unity, and that in turn would crown [him] with the grace to which the enlightened story-teller will at any time, for his interest, sacrifice if need be all other graces whatever' (*Art* 318). However, the 'sacrifices' of which James speaks, and which are necessitated by the technique, have also been condemned.

E.M. Forster, writing in 1927, insists: 'So enormous is the sacrifice that many readers cannot get interested in James, although they can follow what he says (his difficulty has been much exaggerated), and can appreciate his effects. They cannot grant his premise, which is that most of human life has to disappear before he can do us a novel' (161). Leavis, like Forster, also disparages *The Ambassadors* because he feels that it lacks 'life': '*The Ambassadors* ... which he seems to have thought his greatest success, produces an effect of disproportionate "doing" — of a technique the subtleties and elaborations of which are not sufficiently controlled by a feeling for,value and significance in living' (186).

The technique is not the only aspect of the work which gives rise to difficulties. Indeed, a survey of both early and recent criticism will lead a reader to agree with Ronald Wallace's observation that 'floundering in generic uncertainty, critics have been unable to agree upon the quality of Lambert Strether's education or the meaning of the conclusion of the novel' ('Comic' 31). Just as the critics cannot agree as to the success of James's technique, neither, as Wallace notes, can they agree about the success of Strether's development.

On the one hand, Dorothea Krook, in keeping with earlier critics such as Beach and Lubbock, reads the text as a testament to the power of consciousness and finds Strether's development complete: 'The "passion" and the "bond" are extended beyond the purely personal

relationship envisaged in the *Notebooks* to embrace a whole view of life, indeed a whole dimension of human experience; and here the pain of I the loss and waste implied by the "too late" experience - which the/ famous anecdote from which the novel sprang poignantly expresses -I is virtually annihilated by the redeeming power of consciousness,'\ (332). Not all critics, however, share Krook's view, and Strether's 'fine) consciousness' has been questioned. Matthiessen, although one of the novel's supporters, is dubious about Strether's actions, or to be more specific, the lack of them, and he suggests that James's confidence in his protagonist may be unfounded: 'The burden *of The Ambassadors* is that Strether has awakened to a wholly new sense of life. Yet he does nothing at all to fulfill that sense. Therefore, fond as James is of him, we cannot help feeling his relative emptiness' (39). Laurence Holland writes in agreement with Matthiessen, and also distrusts Strether's 'improvement.' He contends that 'the dubious Tightness of Strether's folly, however right and however appropriate to the "stiffer proprieties" of James's form, is precisely dreadful, as Maria claims' (281).

The novel, thus, generates very different responses, a conflict difficult to reconcile from a Realist/humanist perspective. Nicola Bradbury offers an interesting insight into the work when she suggests that *The Ambassadors,* 'James's most finished work,' is 'the true precursor of the j last novels in being open-ended. Duality, rather than roundness, is the j characteristic of *The Ambassadors' (Late* 36). Clearly, this novel works / against attempts to unify and confine it, and frustrates Realist Masculine searches for singular meaning.

The Ambassadors is an interesting novel, since, while on its Realist surface Strether abandons provincialism and embraces cosmopolitanism, its language and its textual figurations suggest something else. In fact, the text can be read as a critique of such a referential reading and offers suggestions for an alternative interpretation, in which Strether embraces Feminine multiplicity. John Carlos Rowe notes that Strether has a tendency to fictionalize or 'contextualize' his experience, and asserts that the Lambinet scene is a 'metaliterary moment not only for James's novel but, more important, for Strether's own composition of self (*Theoretical* 198). This observation is illuminating, for *The Ambassadors* can indeed be read as a metaliterary novel which concerns itself primarily with language and reading. Like *In the Cage,* it focuses on interpretations and fictionalizes the 'realities' it presents. Therefore, as Yeazell points out, 'however we may try to keep the minds of the narrator and his characters properly distinct, the language of the late novels themselves continually defeats us' (12). Or more specifically,

the language of the novel defeats singular attempts to confine it to a Realist reading. In Maud Ellmann's words, 'James's prose refuses to save meaning' (104). Ellmann suggests that in *The Ambassadors* 'Paris is a text' (102), a text which Strether learns to read, but she notes that he 'must read between the lines that Madame de Vionnet has superscribed if he is to restore the text of Chad. But instead of saving meaning, he saves reading' (100). Ellmann's study is noteworthy because, unlike most criticism of this work, it draws attention to the important role which women play in it. She does not explore this role in detail, but her observations foreground the parallel between language and the figurations of women and cause one to speculate on the reason why the female characters have been largely ignored in Realist/humanist readings of this novel. I would suggest that where the Feminine Other in some of the earlier texts such as 'The Real Thing,' 'The Middle Years,' and 'The Figure in the Carpet' is manifested in artistic representation, in *The Ambassadors* it is more directly posited in certain female characters, whose 'presence' works to Feminize the text itself.

Not surprisingly, then, as in the earlier works, these female characters engender interpretative problems, both within the novel and outside it. Again, as we have seen in *Roderick Hudson,* 'The Author of Beltraffio,' and 'The Lesson of the Master,' the Feminine Other disrupts Masculine Realist referentiality, and the text attempts to control it by binding these women in an effort to restore coherence. Nonetheless, because they are Other and cannot be 'known,' these female characters work to undercut the text's explicit ideology of 'knowability' and to subvert authorial and critical attempts at textual unification. Generally, those studies of *The Ambassadors* which dwell, to some extent, on the female characters have sexist overtones, as can be seen in Cargill's observation that 'Strether's European experience helps him to define what is admirable in woman, a combination of traits beyond his ken in Woollett, and his definition includes few of the virtues exalted there' (325). Cargill goes on to attribute the similarity of Maria Gostrey's and Marie de Vionnet's names to a symbolic representation 'of how woman to her cost is in a primary sense responsible for man's knowledge of life and of living' (326). He discusses how the female characters function in Strether's education, and this idea is echoed in other critical readings. David Robinson suggests that Strether pays for his moral education by forgoing his relations with women: 'He pays for the life of growth by relinquishing the human comfort of his relations with the women of the novel. Loneliness is the cost of Strether's self-reliance' (441). Don Anderson, who reads *The Ambassadors* as a 'meta-novel,' asserts thai Strether *'misreads* Madame de Vionnet... This, then, is where James's dramatization of Strether's shaping, framing, structuring, habits leads: to a demonstration of the dangers, for moral insight, of those very activities' (70).

The text's women are marginalized in the criticism, just as they are in the text, because, from a Realist/humanist perspective, they generate manifest difficulties. Interestingly, Holland draws attention to what I perceive as the crux of the problem when he suggests that the female characters are plural, and that Madame de Vionnet, in particular, is polysemous, for she 'displays another order of variety which Miss Gostrey attributes to a type of individual who commands many languages and harbors many minds, possessing "minds with doors as numerous as the many-tongued clusters of confessionals at Saint Peter's" (257-8). Holland also notes, as does Robinson but from a different perspective, that it is 'the women who are sacrificed to make their [men's] future fulfillment possible' (279). Women are used, like tools, as a means of seeing, or more precisely, of interpreting. But in this, they perform an integral function within the novel, for each major female character embodies a particular mode of reading. Although they also function as author figures, in this capacity they inspire a particular approach to the texts they create. As a result, their authorial roles become a further means of exemplifying their theoretical stance. Mrs Newsome is a proponent of Realist/humanist reading and represents the need for referentiality; Maria Gostrey is an intermediary figure who teaches Strether to decipher, but to decipher in a way which promotes misreadings; and Madame de Vionnet actually personifies the open text, which she then helps Strether to interpret plurally. Strether evolves through each woman's tutelage to the point where he too, ultimately, embraces multiplicity.

Mrs Newsome is an interesting figure, since she is absent from the action of the novel and, as Julie Rivkin notes (824), parodies the absent omniscient author. Yet as author she further illustrates the process of referential reading in that she tries to instil this mode in her readers. She performs a Masculine function, for she is a Realist creator who attempts to control Strether's (and the reader's) means of seeing and interpreting. She also illustrates the untenability of the approach she embodies; since she is absent from the action of the novel, she cannot control her ambassador's behaviour - just as Realist authors cannot control their readers' responses, as was clear in *The Portrait of a Lady.*

Nonetheless, Mrs Newsome's semblance of authority is established

in one of Strether's first descriptions of her, when he compares her to Elizabeth i: 'He had once said to the wearer — and it was as "free" a remark as he had ever made to her - that she looked, with her ruff and other matters, like Queen Elizabeth' (i 51). Like her predecessor, Mrs Newsome attempts to rule with an iron fist in a velvet glove, and Strether's future with her is dependent upon his performing the task she sets, that is, to restore her son, Chad, to the family business. The parallel between woman and textual reading is drawn obliquely here, for Strether's marriage is dependent upon his interpreting the text of Paris in the 'right' way. This self-reflexively mirrors the text itself, since, much as *The Portrait of a Lady* depends upon the idea of autonomous individuality for its 'unity,' *The Ambassadors* is dependent upon Mrs Newsome's (inadequate) method of interpretation for its 'coherence.' Initially, Strether does interpret referentially, and believes that presence is something which can be conveyed and established in writing. Hence, he is intrigued with Mrs Newsome's letters: 'He held them there, lost in thought, as if to prolong the presence of what they gave him; or if at the least to assure them their part in the constitution of some lucidity. His friend wrote admirably, and *her tone was even more in her style than in her voice'* (1 80—1; emphasis mine).[2]

Strether may think that Mrs Newsome is present in her letters, but her 'presence' there constitutes a deferral; because she is absent from the action of the novel, she cannot direct his thoughts and actions, a state of affairs which engenders a certain interpretive freedom. Interestingly enough, while reading, Strether reflects on his liberty: 'It was the difference, the difference of being just where he was and *as* he was, that formed the escape — this difference was so much greater than he had dreamed it would be; and what he finally sat there turning over was the strange logic of his finding himself so free' (1 81). It is not surprising that Mrs Newsome does not approve of Strether's decision to perform independently of her wishes, and as an attempt to control his actions, she removes even her deferred presence from him — which paradoxically leaves him even more free in his interpretations. She does not seem to realize this and stops writing to him as a means of punishment: 'He had for some time been aware that he was hearing

2 This is an interesting quotation, since it privileges writing over speech. The fact that Mrs Newsome's presence is more acutely felt in her letters than in her voice suggests a break, as outlined by Derrida in *Of Crammatology* (6—8), with the traditional view that speech is closer to pure thought, which supposedly exists beyond language.

less than before, and he was now clearly following a process by which Mrs. Newsome's letters could but logically stop. He hadn't had a line for many days, and he needed no proof- though he was, in time, to have plenty - that she wouldn't have put pen to paper after receiving the hint that had determined her telegram. She wouldn't write till Sarah should have seen him and reported on him' (11 46—7).

As an author, Mrs Newsome tries to convey truths through writing, but her attempt is unsuccessful since Strether is not receptive, and he realizes that 'Mrs. Newsome was essentially all moral pressure, the presence of this element was almost identical with her own presence' (11 198). However, as a mode of reading, Mrs Newsome's referential approach provides an interesting example of what we earlier saw as ideology's unsuccessful attempt to fix words. When Strether breaks with Mrs Newsome's ideology, he can no longer understand the transcendental meaning of her words — words which convey morality — because they no longer make 'sense' to him.

Aware that Strether is subverting her efforts at restoration (of Chad and of the Realist text itself, for her referential approach is necessary for its 'cohesion'), Mrs Newsome tries to transfer her deferred presence to her daughter, who is ideologically compatible with her. As a result, Mrs Newsome 'was reaching him [Strether] somehow by the lengthened arm of the spirit, and he was having to that extent to take her into account; but he wasn't reaching her in turn, not making her take *him;* he was only reaching Sarah, who appeared to take so little of him' (11 198). Sarah becomes a substitute for her mother, and her presence merges with that of the absent 'author' of this drama. She becomes associated, and in fact one and the same, with her mother in the other characters' eyes. When Strether mentions to Chad that he would like to see Sarah, the confusion between the two women is apparent: ' "I want to see her again." It drew from Chad again the same question "To see Mother?" "To see - for the present - Sarah" ' (11 225).

When Maria Gostrey notes that Chad should see his mother, the presences of Mrs Newsome and Sarah are enmeshed. This suggests that neither has a real independent presence within the narrative since each is dependent on the other for textual definition. Their characterization begins to slide, one into the other, since Sarah is somehow also Mrs Newsome, and Mrs Newsome is also Sarah: 'Mrs. Newsome has been with him [Chad], this month, with an intensity that I'm sure he has thoroughly felt; he has lavishly entertained her, and she has let him have her thanks ...' 'Mrs. Newsome?' [asked Maria]. 'No, Sarah - which both for Chad and for myself, has served all the

purpose' (n 236—237). Mrs Newsome's and Sarah's textual figuration contains an implicit self-reflexive analysis of language: just as Sarah and Mrs Newsome are decentred as individual separate subjects because they are substitutes for each other, so are words only substitutes for other words, and thus they constitute a continual deferral and not a 'presence' at all. Strether seems to realize this, and as a result, he begins to find Mrs Newsome's mode of reading inflexible and confining: '[It] doesn't admit surprises. It's a fact that, 1 think, describes and represents her; and it falls in with what I tell you — that she's all, as I've called it, fine cold thought. She had, to her own mind, worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for me as well as for herself. Whenever she has done that, you see, there's no room left; no margin, as it were, for any alteration. She's filled as full, packed as tight, as she'll hold, and if you wish to get anything more or different either out or in — (11 239).

Because she is a strong supporter of reading referentially, despite the fact that language is constantly shown to be not simply referential at all, Mrs Newsome is textually rigidified, and Strether describes her as 'some particularly large iceberg in a cool blue northern sea' (11 240). Sarah too shares in this analogy: for Strether, 'she was definite. She was — at last — crystalline' (11 217). Strether can see through her because she is ideologically fixed, and he begins to fear the single, closed referential reading which she represents: 'What is she coming *for}* — to kill me?' (11 188). This note of threat is interesting, since Sarah's singular approach could be said to kill language insofar as it restricts its play. The text seems uneasy about this method of reading as fixing and killing, even though it ostensibly subscribes to it: it figures Sarah as stifled when Miss Barrace observes that she is 'bricked up, she's buried alive' (11 176). Sarah is buried alive because she attempts to confine what cannot be confined, and this includes language.

In an important article that discusses this point, Julie Rivkin notes that what she calls 'the New England view,' which Mrs Newsome represents, is unattainable, since '[the] attempt to fix words to referents only to open up abysses of ambiguity ... suggests both the infidelities of language toward the experience to which it supposedly corresponds and the possible promiscuities harbored in the novel's relationships themselves' (823). Mrs Newsome's efforts are abandoned at least in part because Strether comes to see the limitations of this type of constricting referential reading. As Mary Cross notes, Strether has to forge a new vocabulary in Paris, since his words no longer 'signify': 'Trapped in his own lexicon, he finds it difficult to make Woollett words match Paris

experience, and the record of his progress through the "whole bunch of data" Paris thrusts upon him is his acquisition of a vocabulary to accommodate it. His Woollett rhetoric is quite "dished" in the course of the story, symbolic of the linguistic nature of his adventure' ('Find' 402).

Miss Barrace, with her 'convex Parisian eyes' (1 113), provides a dramatization of Cross's contention. When he first meets her, Strether is still searching for meaning, but Miss Barrace cannot easily be incorporated into his Woollett discourse, and thus her conversation with Little Bilham baffles him and does not 'signify': 'he was in fact so often at sea that his sense of the range of reference was merely general and that he on several different occasions guessed and interpreted only to doubt. He wondered what they meant, but there were things he scarce thought they could be supposed to mean, and "Oh no - not *thatl"* was at the end of most of his ventures' (1 116). Curiously, like Mrs Newsome, Miss Barrace is also equated with absence, when Strether figures her as an omniscient author, controlling the scene yet absent from it: 'That sense had already been so well fed by the situation about them that she had quitted the other room, forsaken the music, dropped out of the play, abandoned, in a word, the stage itself, that she might stand a minute behind the scenes with Strether and so perhaps figure as one of the famous augurs replying, behind the oracle, to the wink of the other' (11 174). However, the difference between the two women is apparent when Miss Barrace advocates absence as a means of freedom, when she sees 'in an instant all the absences that left them free' (11 174). But Strether cannot appreciate this freedom yet, and what is clear to him in their conversation is only that which it lacks: 'It came out as nothing had come yet; links were missing and connexions unnamed, but it was suddenly as if they were at the heart of their subject' (11 181). He desires coherence; he does not yet realize that it is unattainable.'

Indeed, paradoxically, Mrs Newsome's plight also affirms incoherence rather than coherence, for her mode of interpretation can be only partially instilled in her ambassadors and is thus shown to be inadequate. Rivkin elucidates Mrs Newsome's theory of representation: 'As the absent authority who stands behind all the novel's ambassadors, she sends her delegates off with the express understanding that they alter nothing of that for which they stand in. She wants a representative who can fill in for her, maintain a likeness, without a difference, who can deliver the message she speaks "to the letter." Were she to enunciate her theory of representation, it would resemble those passages in the preface where James speaks of straight growth,

direct speech, and exact replication. Although she makes use of ambassadors, she assumes that her business will be carried out as it would be in person; her fixity of purpose makes it impossible for her to imagine any shift or deviation' (824).

The text itself, however, offers a critique of referentiality and portrays the impossibility of confining or controlling language. Rivkin reads *The Ambassadors* as a dramatization of Derrida's notion of supplementarity. Derrida suggests that supplementing - the substitution of one word or concept for another — engenders the 'mark of an emptiness,' for it fills the implied absence only by proxy and thus does not fill it at all: 'the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of;* if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence' *(Of Grammatology* 145). Applying this theory to *The Ambassadors,* Rivkin perceives the textual ambassadors as substitutes for an absent authority, a situation that I have described in reference to Sarah and Mrs Newsome. This concept decentres both the authority and its supplement (819) and allows for substitution. For Rivkin, Maria Gostrey becomes the first substitute, or the first deferral of authority: 'Maria Gostrey can be seen as the expert on the ambassadorial logic that will substitute for Mrs. Newsome's authority. The novel's first chapter serves as Strether's introduction to this logic of revision and substitution, and appropriately enough, Maria Gostrey is herself not only a substitute for the figure that Strether expects — Waymarsh - but also what James calls *a ficelle,* a supplementary figure in the compositional story' (824).

Maria, as a Feminine figure, begins to decentre the Masculine authority of Mrs Newsome and New England by showing Strether that facts are something other than factual and that referentiality is detached from reference (Rivkin 825). This idea supports my contention that Maria Gostrey teaches Strether to interpret in a mode other than referential. While I agree that she is a substitute and a supplementary figure, she is also the woman on whom Strether relies to help him to decipher the text of Paris and its inhabitants. As Rivkin notes, even her name, Gostrey, or 'go stray,' suggests a deviation from Mrs Newsome's mode of interpretation (824). It is difficult to denominate Maria's function within the text because she is an intermediary figure; she prepares the way for the polysemous Marie de Vionnet and thus helps Strether to evolve away from single referential reading toward polyvocal interpretation. Maria is like many of the characters in James's

short stories, since she regards absence as a source of intellectual fecundity. In a narrative intrusion, when Strether refuses to tell Maria about the Woollett article, the reader is informed that Maria actually prefers to remain in ignorance (or prefers an absence of knowledge), for 'in ignorance she could humour her fancy, and that proved a useful freedom. She could treat the little nameless object as indeed unnameable - she could make their [her and Strether's] abstention enormously definite' (1 61). Maria also equates women with mystery and absence in a conversation with Strether, in which he exclaims 'Oh you women!' (1 233), and Maria responds, 'Yes — there we are. We're abysses' (1 234). The text here explicitly suggests that Woman is an abyss, a nothingness, a gap, or that which is not there, and which as a result is an absence. In so doing, it figures the situation described in Chapter 3, where the Feminine Other is implicitly linked to absence. In *The Ambassadors,* even Mrs. Newsome constitutes an opening abyss of sorts, since her absence from the text leaves the other characters free to interpret her wishes; because she is not there to effect the singularity she desires, she herself allows for misreadings.

Like Mrs Newsome, Maria chooses to absent herself, at least for a time, from the Parisian scene and thus contributes to Strether's misreadings of it; the absence of her knowledge of the situation leaves Strether free to read, as best he can, the relationship of Chad and Madame de Vionnet. In fact, in keeping with the textual pattern traced here, Maria must absent herself in order to help Strether come to the realization that it is impossible to do anything but misread. While this may not be James's or Maria's intention, it is the result of her absence. Unlike Mrs Newsome, however, Maria is not disturbed by Strether's misreadings, and she writes to him and simply pleads for a deferral: 'His great friend, for that matter, was still absent, as well as remarkably silent; even at the end of three weeks Miss Gostrey hadn't come back. She wrote to him from Mentone, admitting that he must judge her grossly inconsequent — perhaps in fact for the time odiously faithless; but asking for patience, for a deferred sentence, throwing herself in short on his generosity' (11 3—4).

Maria is a curious figure. As a ficelle, she is essentially outside the text, just as she remains on the outside of the Parisian group; yet while she ostensibly removes herself in order to be more objective and thus to help Strether (and the reader) interpret what he sees, she often contributes to his misunderstandings of it. Her silence allows Strether first to believe that Chad is involved with Jeanne de Vionnet and later

to assume that Chad's relationship with Marie is a 'virtuous attachment.'[3] However, while Maria induces Strether's misreadings, she herself differs from Marie de Vionnet, for she has too much at stake to embrace multiplicity completely. Although she is on the edges of the Parisian scene, as Miss Barrace notes, she is not a disinterested party: '[Miss Barrace] wished to know why he [Strether] had thought it better Maria shouldn't be present. "Oh ... it was really her own idea. I should have wished it. But she dreads responsibility." "And isn't that a new thing for her?" "To dread it? No doubt - no doubt. But her nerve has given way." Miss Barrace looked at him a moment. "She has too much at stake" ' (11 175).

While Maria allows for plurality, she still desires some form of singular referentiality, for she cannot accept that hers and Strether's is a 'meaningless' liaison. However, her propensity for plurality is placed in a more ambiguous context, in which the text as a whole addresses the threat that she poses to its overt referentiality. Her role is marginalized, in fact, by its reversion to sexist logic: her context within the text works to discredit her. Hence, it is intimated that Maria deliberately leads Strether astray from Mrs Newsome in order to secure him for herself. While blatant sexism is absent from the novel, the description of Maria in the Project for *The Ambassadors* foregrounds what is only latent in the text, and her portrayal conforms to the patriarchal view of a 'mere lone, lean, migratory spinster' (378). James also describes her as young but 'young as a slightly battered unmarried woman of five-and-thirty can be' (378). These quotations from the *Notebooks* highlight what can be seen as the sexist overtones in Strether's attempt to discern the reason behind Maria's decision to withhold knowledge about Madame de Vionnet: 'It came out for him more than ever yet that she had had from the first a knowledge she believed him not to have had, a knowledge the sharp acquisition of which might be destined to make a difference for him' (11 296). He attributes her 'decision' to lead him astray to a selfish, traditionally 'feminine' motive - possessiveness: 'The difference for him might not inconceivably be an arrest of his independence and a change in his attitude — in other words a revulsion in favour of the principles of Woollett. She had really prefigured the possibility of a shock that would send him swinging back to Mrs. Newsome' (11 296).

When Maria observes of Marie de Vionnet's future with Chad, 'What

3 It is interesting to note that in the Project for the novel she actually lies to Strether tells him that Marie is 'nursing' Chad for her daughter (394).

woman was *ever* safe?' (11 298), her question evokes a multitude of responses from the reader, since her observation can also be interpreted self-reflexively and leads the reader to wonder if female representation is ever safe from patriarchal attempts to confine it. Interestingly enough, Maria too is made to subscribe to and accept sexist dictates, and the reason she offers for her absence demonstrates her subjection to the dominant, patriarchal ideology: 'I didn't want you to put... to me ... the question of what you were at last — a week ago — to see for yourself. I didn't want to have to lie for her. I felt that to be too much for me. A man of course is always expected to do it — to do it, I mean for a woman; but not a woman for another woman; unless perhaps on the tit-for-tat principle, as an indirect way of protecting herself. I don't need protection, so that I was free to "funk" you — simply to dodge your test. The responsibility was too much for me. I gained time, and when I came back *the need of a text had blown over'* (11 299; emphasis mine).[4]

According to Maria, men may lie for women, but women will not lie for each other, and in order to elide her responsibility to Strether, she absents herself and thus allows him to misread the Parisian situation. But even so, the novel suggests that Maria does have an ulterior motive in her relations with Strether. Hence, while misreadings do not disturb her, she cannot delight in absence, since she wishes to 'mean' something to him. As a result, 'there was nothing clearly for Maria Gostrey that signified now — save one sharp point, that is, to which she came in time' (11 322). This sharp point is the fate of Madame de Vionnet with Chad, and this signifies to her because it operates as a paradigm for her own fate with Strether. Indeed, Strether does leave her when he no longer needs her services and, in a remarkably suggestive scene, Strether devours Maria's 'small ripe round melon' (11 320) after she cuts it for him and tells him that there is 'nothing' she would not do for him (11 326). He decides, however, that 'nothing' is what he requires. Although she pleads, 'With your wonderful impressions you'll have got a great deal,' he responds, 'A great deal... but nothing like *you.* It's you who would make me wrong' (11 326). He is 'right' without her, and as Maria cannot 'resist' (11 327) him, she is left, alone, in Paris, and in the text of Paris which she has helped Strether to read.

All women function as tools within *The Ambassadors,* as Waymarsh's

4 Note that Maria draws attention to her function as an interpretative source and, in this instance, to her role, like Mrs Newsome's, as an 'author' of the text which she then helps Strether to read.

description of the American girl makes clear: 'The American girl's a thing that your country must at least allow ours the privilege to say we *can* show you. But her full beauty is only for those who know how to make use of her' (n 106-7). This view shares much with the textual response to femininity in earlier works such as *The Portrait of a Lady,* where woman is presented as a creature who must be controlled, and is reduced to a passive, usable object. However, in *The Ambassadors,* Waymarsh's observation is undermined by the textual representations of female characters. Mamie Pocock, the American girl within the text, at first appears to be 'safe' for Strether since he believes that she is understandable or 'textually' coherent. He senses 'that day after day he had been conscious in respect to his young lady of something odd and ambiguous yet something into which he could at last read a meaning' (11 147). But the 'meaning' he discovers is only one of several; indeed, he misreads her situation, when he finds her on the balcony and assumes she is waiting for him, whereas she is actually waiting for Little Bilham (11 148). The duplicitous appearance of Mamie's action gives rise to layers of meaning, or polysemy, and Mamie thus foreshadows the multiplicity of Marie de Vionnet (who is also duplicit within the text and thus multiplicit).[5] Mamie impedes Strether's attempt to reduce her: 'But, friendly, familiar, light of touch and happy of tact she exquisitely stayed out; so that it was for all the world as if to show she could deal with him without being reduced to - well scarcely anything' (11 151).

Ultimately, Strether decides that Mamie is 'one of the real and the right' (11 172), and she personifies James's conception of the American girl — innocent but complex. On the other hand, Strether initially perceives the French girl, Jeanne de Vionnet, as innocent and simple. Her appearance with Chad at Gloriani's garden party enables Strether to see the 'truth' (1 220) about her relations with Chad, a truth which is, of course, inaccurate, and which leads Rivkin to interpret this scene as a paradigm for the rest of the text, since Strether's reading of Jeanne demonstrates that a series of truths, all superimposed on each other, is the only Truth possible (82g). Interestingly, Strether reads Jeanne

5 It is interesting to note that James's texts frequently present women (eg, Christina Light, Mme Merle, Mrs Ambient, and Gwendolyn) as duplicitous, in an attempt to 'rationalize' or articulate or make referentially understandable their multiplicity. It is also interesting that this interpretation of their behaviour is inadequate, since their deceit is often the result of their attempt to cope with or combat either their marginalized social position or their society's restrictive social norms, as will be discussed later with regard to Charlotte Stant.

as a picture — as a work of art: 'What was in the girl was indeed too soft, too unknown for direct dealing; so that one could only gaze at it as at a picture, quite staying one's own hand' (1 222). The tactile imagery here is disturbing, yet Jeanne is clearly 'pure' in Strether's eyes; and as a reinforcement of this suggestion, when he first sees her, she is a 'young girl in a white dress and a softly plumed white hat'(i 220). She is presented in direct contrast to her mother, who is 'dressed in black, but in black that struck him as light and transparent' (1 210). However, the ostensible juxtaposition effected here is again plural, since it offers shades rather than definite meanings. Just as Jeanne is not as simple as she appears - the novel hints that she is in love with her mother's lover - Marie is not as 'bad' as Wollett would have her.

Marie de Vionnet is often described in terms of language, an analogy which serves to emphasize her plural status. Marie is able to make language her own and speaks 'in an English clearly of the easiest to her, yet unlike any other he ha[s] ever heard' (1 21 o). Not surprisingly, Maria Gostrey describes her as 'polyglot as a little Jewess' (which she wasn't, oh no!) and chattering French, English, German, Italian, anything one would, in a way that made a clean sweep' (1 230). Indeed, Marie's plural character, which is evident in her multiple linguistic and personal nature, makes her difficult to place: 'It would doubtless be difficult to-day, as between French and English, to name her and place her; she would certainly show, on knowledge, Miss Gostrey felt, as one of those convenient types who don't keep you explaining - minds with doors as numerous as the many-tongued cluster of confessionals at Saint Peter's. You might confess to her with confidence in Roumelian, and even Roumelian sins' (1 230).

As Holland, Rivkin, and Ellmann all perceive, Marie de Vionnet is a manifestation of multiplicity. In Miss Barrace's words, 'She's various. She's fifty women.' (1 265). She is like 'Cleopatra in the play, indeed various and multifold': 'She had aspects, characters, days, nights - or had them at least, showed them by a mysterious law of her own,. when in addition to everything she happened also to be a woman of genius. She was an obscure person, a muffled person one day, and a showy person, an uncovered person the next' (1 271).[6] The difference

6 Madame de Vionnet has much in common with Christina Light - both are ambiguously presented; both are difficult to classify. However, Marie differs in that she functions as a representation of plural reading, where Christina is merely marginalized as the text attempts closure. The contrast between the two characters indicates that despite James's Realist pronouncements, his texts themselves begin to celebrate multiplicity.

between Mrs Newsome's and Marie's approaches is indicated in the way in which they allow Strether to interpret texts. Strether believes that Marie personifies a text, and thus her attempt at authorship is embodied in herself. Initially, he pictures her as 'some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written, renewing her courage, renewing her clearness, in splendidly-protected meditation' (II 6-7). However, where Mrs Newsome tries to dictate the way in which her words should be interpreted, Marie allows Strether to form his own meanings of her. By offering herself as a text for Strether to read (a text which he misreads continuously), she, like the polyvocal mode of reading that she signifies, inspires him to co-create texts with her. In her effort to teach him about co-production, or the active role of the reader, she demonstrates to him that writing cannot be confined. Her instruction supersedes Maria Gostrey's, for through it, Strether learns that there is no firm ground in referentiality (Rivkin 829). Indeed, she teaches him that language is Feminine and plural through the layers of meaning which her speech engenders: 'her voice itself, the light low quaver of her deference to the solemnity about them, seemed to make her words mean something that they didn't mean openly' (II 11).

The text is ambivalent toward Marie, as it is toward Maria Gostrey, and not surprisingly, Strether distrusts her Feminine nature, since she defeats his attempts to place her. He finds her artificial: 'She spoke now as if her art were all an innocence, and then again as if her innocence were all an art' (II 116). Strether continually tries to limit Marie to his Realist singular reading of her, and when he discovers her in an adulterous liaison with Chad, he initially believes that she is limited, reduced: 'the wonderful woman's overflow of surprise and amusement was wholly into French ... the present result was odd, fairly veiling her identity, shifting her back into a mere voluble class or race to the intense audibility of which he was by this time inured. When she spoke the charming slightly strange English he best knew her by he seemed to feel her as a creature, among all the millions, with a language quite to herself, the real monopoly of a special shade of speech, beautifully easy for her, yet of a colour and a cadence that were both inimitable and matters of accident' (II 260—1).

He continues this Realist limiting process in his visit to her rooms upon his return from the country, and again attempts to place her, this time historically. In her apartment, he detects the voice of Paris, the smell of revolution, 'perhaps simply the smell of blood' (II 274).

He initially believes that his efforts are successful, and Marie is reduced in his eyes, her meanings made single. He perceives her from a traditional sexist point of view; thus, he can 'think of nothing but the passion, mature, abysmal, pitiful, she represented, and the possibilities she betrayed': 'She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of time; but she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition it had been given him, in all his years, to meet; and yet he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man'(II 286). Marie knows that she has been reduced and characterizes herself as 'old and abject and hideous,' but she reiterates absence and the impossibility of certainty when she describes her own future: 'There's not a grain of certainty in my future — for the only certainty is that I shall be the loser in the end' (II 288). Unlike Maria Gostrey, Marie accepts absence and loss and does not need to cling to some form of signification. Marie, the multiple person, teaches Strether that absence is the only certainty, and absence disallows easy definitions.

Strether comes to realize that his singular efforts to limit the plural Marie are simplistic and ineffectual. He decides in his talk with Maria Gostrey that Marie is still plural, and he appreciates her 'beauty of everything,' the 'impression she makes': 'She has such variety and yet such harmony' (II 300). Yet he still attempts to reduce her at least to a single passive role, and warns Chad not to leave her before he has got everything he can from her, and affirms, 'From such a woman, there will always be something to be got, my remark's not a wrong to her' (II 312). Strether may become enlightened, but he still regards Marie, and women in general, as tools for men - to be discarded when their usefulness dwindles and they are 'used up.'

Marie's embodiment of a text is not a passive role, however, for her figuration becomes a means of instruction for the male characters. While neither Chad nor Strether fully appreciates Marie, both men learn from her. She has moulded Chad, and along with Maria Gostrey she teaches Strether to interpret life as a text. As Rowe has noted, the Lambinet scene reverses the principles of Realism, since in it, nature resembles art rather than vice versa. In this scene, Marie's influence is clear, for Strether reflects on her presence throughout the day, and 'one of the things that most lingered with him on his hillside was this delightful facility, with such a woman, of arriving at a new tone' (250). While thinking of her, he views the French countryside as a Lambinet, a painting: 'The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines ... It was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover he was freely walking about in it.

He did this last, for an hour, to his heart's content, making for the shady woody horizon and boring so deep into his impression and his idleness that he might fairly have got through them again and reached the maroon-coloured wall' (n 247).

The illusion that he is walking about in a Lambinet remains with him all day, as he notes when he has 'meanwhile not once overstepped the oblong gilt frame' (11 252). And as Marie has taught him to do, by offering herself as a polyvocal text which encourages him actively to co-produce meaning, he begins to think in terms of texts and reads the 'spell' of his picture: 'For this had been all day at bottom the spell of the picture - that it was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky. The play and the character had, without his knowing it till now, peopled all his space for him, and it seemed somehow quite happy that they should offer themselves, in the conditions so supplied, with a kind of inevitability' (11 253). Strether begins to contextualize everything that he sees: '[he found] not a breath of the cooler evening that wasn't somehow a syllable of the text. The text was simply, when condensed, that in *these* places such things were, and that if it was in them one elected to move about one had to make one's account with what one lighted on' (11 254).

Indeed, the new linguistic approach that Strether adopts in the final pages of the novel leads Cross to contend that 'having found the names, Strether has won through to a finer consciousness, paying the price of the Jamesian hero in sacrificing happiness, possessions, even love. His is a moral victory; he is the hero of a text over which he now has dominion, having conquered its events by a command of language that, hard won, is the outward and visible sign of his — the distinguished thing, at last - inward grace' ('Find' 418). However, this view is too simplistic. Instead, as Ellmann notes, Strether makes a choice and 'falls in love with ambiguity, till everything he sees becomes the sign that veils some rich dark mystery. The world twinkles with alterity' (100). This is perhaps more to the point, since in the conclusion, Strether chooses, and his choice reflects the tutelage of Marie, for he makes the decision: 'Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself (n 326). To choose nothing is to choose absence and the plurality which it engenders. Because Strether realizes that meaning cannot be confined or deciphered, he chooses openness when he chooses nothing. Plurality, which the women he encounters in Europe have taught Strether to desire, is reaffirmed by the text itself, which cannot be closed since one cannot close or limit a choice of nothing, or absence.