

The Metaphoric Function of Ambassadorship : A Reconsideration of the “Green Cover” in *The Ambassadors*

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AS regards the later works of Henry James, Ruth Bernard Yeazell insists that “in the imagination of metaphor the desire for escape and the impulse toward uncomfortable discovery are strangely entwined”.¹ One of the most important signs in *The Ambassadors* that have this sort of metaphoric power will be the “green cover” of *Woollett Review*, which most critics believe is the only thing that the protagonist, Lambert Strether, can make a great display of his position and profession.

Certainly, the name on the cover stands for Strether’s identity to a great extent : “He was Lambert Strether because he was on the cover, whereas it should have been, for anything like glory, that he was on the cover because he was Lambert Strether”.² Except this extract, however, this sign always appears in the form of “green cover”, and that exclusively in the former half of the text. While much has been discussed in the field of Jamesean studies about the protagonist’s identity inscribed on the cover, especially about his “name” on it, no critic has been engaged in the study of the colour “green”. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how metaphorically the ambassador’s subjectivity is constructed, through the analysis of what the cover with the name, not the name on the cover, represents, with a clue to implication of the colour “green”.

When Strether makes acquaintance with Maria Gostrey, he exchanges a pasteboard with her, faced with the social problem of self-introduction. For him, her name on the visiting card functionally embodies her identity, for his reliance upon this “little token” is evident in so “positively droll” a feeling that “he should already have Maria Gostrey, whoever she was — of which he had n’t really the least idea — in a place of safe keeping” (21, 12-13). She

mistakes his card for her own since he puts her card into his wastecoaat pocket, keeping his own meanwhile in evidence ; Julie Rivkin states that her mistake “links the interchangeability of cards to the interchangeability of other representations”.³ This principle will suggest not simply such ambassadorship that Rivkin calls “the logic of delegation”⁴ but also the reversibility of the value of the name on the card and the value of the card with the name. The name on the “green cover” of *Woollett Review* is a very similar but much more problematic example :

“...Woollett has a Review — which Mrs. Newsome, for the most part, magnificently pays for and which I, not at all magnificently, edit. My name’s on the cover”, Strether pursued, “and I’m really rather disappointed and hurt that you [Maria Gostrey] seem never to have heard of it”.

She neglected for a moment this grievance. “And what kind of Review is it?”

His serenity was now completely restowed. “Well, it’s green”.

“Do you mean in political colour as they say here — in thought?”

“No ; I mean the cover’s green — of the most lovely shade”.

(21, 64).

There is fairly general agreement in the field of Jamesean studies that his “name” on the cover is the only thing that bears directly upon his identity. Stuart Hutchinson states Strether’s “achievement ... is that his identity now amounts to little more than his name being to the fore in ... Mrs. Newsome’s Review” ;⁵ David McWhirter’s view is not appreciatively different in that he comments the protagonist at least possesses “one presentable little scrap of an identity” (21, 65), compared with Jim Pocock in terms of the position of males at Woollett.⁶ Moreover, some critics try to get a clue to the interpretation of the Review’s cover by regarding Strether as a literary man. Whilst Nicola Bradbury maintains that his diction has “a conscious poeticism”⁷ because of his position as editor, Merle A. Williams insists that his name on the cover represents at once his position as editor and his lack of creative skill, in comparison with a successful sculptor, Gloriani.⁸

Strether’s lack of creativity is revealed even in his position as Mrs. New-

some's ambassador. The role as delegate for her, which requires him to represent the absent authority, is supposed to govern his own actions and permit him no direct profit from the mission. It is because of this "false position" (21, xi) that he fails in so deviant a reading as to transpose the literal into the figurative; that is, only literally does he try to read Mrs. Newsome, the mission, Maria's visiting card, and even the colour "green", on account of his blind ambassadorship. Rivkin states

Strether's comic insistence on the literal in the face of Maria Gostrey's more convincing figurative interpretation of his words suggests that he fears such deviations into the metaphoric will lead him to stray from propriety. But in substituting cover for content, pigment for point of view, he exposes what he tries to conceal. Strether's joke of identifying the book by its cover is more serious than it might appear, for it bears directly upon his identity.⁹

I share this view except one issue; his "joke of identifying the book by its cover" is "serious" because not only of the cover's function to represent his identity but also of the author's rhetorical device that demands so deviant a reading as to prove that the "joke" is far from a joke. It is no wonder that Strether's words sound like a "joke" because, in the dialogical scene, a conversation is never organised to begin with. Despite the interlocutress's question about "what kind of Review" he edits, his answer is sillily "It's green"; what she asks is the journal's "kind", not its apparent feature. Maria Gostrey, who tries to interpret the "green" figuratively as some "political colour" or so, does make a *reasonable* reaction to his asymmetrical response, though he is not in the least conscious of how amiss he spoke. His substitution of the "pigment for point of view", then, might suggest some interconnexion of the literal "green" to some metaphoric *green*-ness; it is necessary to anatomise the sign "green" so as to uncover and discover what might be covered with the "green cover", if we take into account the author's frequent uses of the phrase "green cover" — neither the "journal's cover" nor "Review's cover" but "green cover" — every time in the subsequence of the former half of the text.

Green is the colour which is sometimes used when the object expressed by

it is not autonomous. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, figurative meanings of the term “green” include “Of things, chiefly immaterial: Not fully developed, matured, or elaborated” (A : 8-a) and “Of persons, their powers or capacities: Immature, raw, untrained, inexperienced” (A : 8-c). Moreover, the term “green” figures also the state of there being a lack which is implied by these definitions, and even desire to fill it: “Of the complexion (often *green and wan, green and pale*): Having a pale, sickly, or bilious hue, indicative of fear, jealousy, ill-humour, or sickness. ... So *the green eye*, the eye of jealousy” (A : 3-a). The “green eye” is the expression which began to be used in and after William Shakespeare as the meaning of “jealousy”. *Othello* would be a good example which demonstrates that the sign “green” had already been encoded in the culture of mediaeval England as the figure of “jealousy”; Iago tries to trap the Moor into destruction, framing up a story of Desdemona’s unchastity: “O, beware jealousy; /It is the green-ey’d monster, which doth mock /That meat it feeds on”.¹⁰

Strether’s *green* aspect in these senses is revealed in the form of “envy”, not of “jealousy”, to the people around him. Waymarsh’s presence, for instance, convinces him that he is a marginal man in society. Doing him “the highest justice” (21, 27), Strether tells Maria Gostrey that Waymarsh “is a success of a kind that I have n’t approached”, while he is “a perfectly equipped failure” (21, 44). Not only does Waymarsh have a great endurance to the worldly shame that his wife has left him but he is also a success in society who has earned a large income as a lawyer, which is “in especial the achievement as to which Strether envied him”. Interestingly, the narration links Strether’s lack of wealth to that of the endurance to a worldly shame: compared with the lawyer’s wealth, “the figure of the income he had arrived at had never been *high enough to look any one in the face*” (21, 28; my italics). This linkage will also reveal that he envies Waymarsh for his social worldly reputation, in spite of his “name” on the Review’s cover.

There are two aspects of predominancy for which the protagonist envies Chad: one is his youth, and the other his behaviour based upon his social position. Chad is the type of the person that he “should enjoy being like” (21, 220). While Strether is always surprised at Madame de Vionnet’s propriety as a representative of Paris, Chad makes a display of his quality and ability to escort

her in an attractive way: (when Strether made acquaintance with her in Gloriani's garden) "Chad was excellently free and light about their encounter; it was one of the occasions on which Strether most wished he himself might have arrived at such ease and such humour" (21, 210). His envy of "Chad's pride in the display" is closely related to that of Chad's position where he is served by his mother's ambassador; "It was, in a world, just when he thus finally felt Chad putting things straight off on him that he envied him" (21, 223).

Also in Book Seventh, in which Strether confesses to Chad that he will betray Mrs. Newsome, "Something happy and easy, something above all unconscious", in the way Chad says that he should like to see his mother, makes him feel "the facility of his attitude and the enviability of his state"; Chad's "facility" of his position as "the lone exile" (22, 32) is strongly contrasted with Strether's marginal position in which he always has to consider Mrs. Newsome. Therefore, his envy to Chad also represents his discontent with the position as her ambassador.

Strether not simply envies others, however; let us see a good example to demonstrate how ambassadorship operates against his envious feeling, before we discuss his envy of Chad's youth. The critics following F. O. Matthiessen have considered the "Live all you can" speech that the protagonist gives to little Bilham as the "essence of 'The Ambassadors'" (21, v); yet, I rather insist, what is of the most significance in the scene of Gloriani's garden is that we can see his strategy to try to transform his envious feeling into the fulfillment of his desire. Surrounded by the "types tremendously alien ... to Woollett" (21, 199), and wanting "to talk with none of them" (21, 216), he is never envious to little Bilham in the famous speech. The closing words of the long speech run as follows:

The right time is *any* time that one is still so lucky as to have. You've plenty; that's the great thing; you're ... so happily and hatefully young. ... Don't at any rate miss things out of stupidity. Do what you like so long as you don't make *my* mistake. For it was a mistake. Live!

(21, 218; James's italics).

What is the rhetorical function of the authorial italics of "*my* mistake", or the

difference in the expressions between “*my* mistake” and, for instance, “the same mistake as mine”? In the expression using the genitive case of the personal pronoun, the “mistake” in his speech is identical with the mistake he himself made, while in the expression using the quasi-relative pronoun, it is difficult to judge whether it is identical with his own mistake or only that of the same kind; that is, its meaning is either “the same mistake *that* I made” or “the same mistake *as* I made”. In short, what is problematic here is whether this is epistemologically *immediate* or *mediate*.

It is needless to say that the virtual meaning of “*my* mistake” is the latter one; yet a clear definition of the subtle nuance like this should be given when the protagonist’s ambassadorship in the speech is examined. Little Bilham is the man who “had come out to Paris to paint ... but study had been fatal to him ... and his productive power faltered in proportion as his knowledge grew” (21, 126). He is, like Strether, a socially marginal person who has failed to get an opportunity; yet his youth, the crucial difference between them, is the very reason why the protagonist advises him to “live” *on behalf of him* since he is “too old” to “live” (21, 217) his own life. It should be noticed, however, that the narrator described the protagonist at the outset of the novel as “the middle age — a man of five-and-fifty” (21, 8); the reduction of “the middle age” to “too old” will show that “wholly instinctive” ambassadorship is “operating” (21, 3) on the senior’s side. This ambassadorship is quite different from his proper function at Woollett to represent Mrs. Newsome and not to get any direct profit from the mission, for his advice not to “make *my* mistake” is nothing less than the prohibition against becoming his *immediate* delegate. It is because he can fulfill his experience vicariously by making little Bilham “live” that he need not “envy” him for his youth in the least.

In this novel, Strether’s acquisition of new knowledge is always represented in parallel with his unsatisfactory past: “He had n’t had the gift of making the most of what he tried. ... Old ghosts of experiments came back to him ... adventures, for the most part, of the sort qualified as lessons” (21, 83). In Paris, however, the “adventures” can be sought in the form of the deviation from Mrs. Newsome’s errand, hence the operation of aberrant ambassadorship that is at once the vicarious and the mediate: “He was n’t there ... to consume — he was there to reconstruct. He was n’t there for his own profit — *not* ...

the direct ; he was there on some chance of feeling the brush of the wing of the stray spirit of youth” (21, 94 ; my italics). Making up his mind to betray her and save Chad and Madame de Vionnet, he says to Maria Gostrey,

I'm youth — youth for the trip to Europe. I began to be young, or at least to get the benefit of it, the moment I met you at Chester. ... Chad gives me the sense of it [youth]... and she [Madame de Vionnet] does the same. ... Though they're young enough, my pair, I don't say they're, in the freshest way, their *own* absolutely prime adolescence ; for that has nothing to do with it. The point is that they're mine. Yes, they're my youth.

(22, 50-51 ; James's italics).

It is noteworthy that the “youth” in Strether's words gradually develops into the figurative. The shift from the literal to the figurative, or from the immediate to the mediate, is the very mechanism of ambassadorship that weaves the textuality of *The Ambassadors*. Here, ambassadorship functions not as a means of the *immediate* delegation for the other but as a contrivance to “re-construct” the “spirit of youth” and cultivate a way of getting his own benefit for which he has envied others. The attempt to get younger by fulfilling what he should have made the most of in his youth is nothing less than the attempt to transfigure his *green*-ness into something mature.

THE protagonist's *name* on the “green cover” of *Woollett Review* should have been the only thing that he can show off his social identity ; yet it is because his name is nothing more than what is always dispensable to Mrs. Newsome that the name, enshrined in *green*, ironically reveals his envy of the worldly reputations of the people around him. It goes without saying that his “envy” should be distinguished from the “jealousy” as a figurative meaning of the term “green” ; yet the fact that he feels not “jealous” but “envious” of others is closely related to the logic of ambassadorship that governs the whole text.

The first definitions of the terms “envy” (substantive) and “jealousy” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* articulate the difference of the extent to which one minds another's superiority. While the term “envy” (defined as “Malignant or hostile feeling ; ill-will, malice, enmity”) simply means hostility, the term

“jealousy” (defined as “Zeal or vehemence of feeling against some person or thing; anger, wrath, indignation”) implies considerably more vehement rivalry. However, the idiomatic phrase “green with jealousy” (which *The Oxford English Dictionary* introduces) is interchangeable with the expression “green with envy” (which *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of English Language* introduces); this interchangeability proves that the figurative meaning of the term “green” can be applied to both “jealousy” and “envy”.

The *green*-ness of Othello, who suspects his wife’s unchastity, is undoubtedly what is vehemently caused out of “jealousy”: “No, Iago, /I’ll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove, /And on the proof, there is no more but this:/ Away at once with love or jealousy!”¹¹ The binarism of “love or jealousy” reveals a destructive aspect of “jealousy”, for it is, like “To be, or not to be”, a choice between everything and nothing, so that Othello gains nothing in the coda like the other characters in the Shakespearean Tragedies. In *The Ambassadors*, on the other hand, the protagonist transfers his envious feeling from the literal to an extremely metaphoric locus; the ambassador, who at first persists in the literal, fearing the “green” of the Review’s cover is deviated into the figurative, gradually comes to misread any texts, which forms a striking contrast with Sarah Pocock, an *immediate* delegate for Mrs. Newsome. It is because of this shift to the metaphoric, or of his betrayal of “Woollett standard”, at the very centre of the novel that the critical sign “green cover” never appears in the latter half of the text.

In the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, James explains Strether’s subjectivity, comparing him to “colours”: Strether

had come with a view that might have been figured by a clear green liquid, say, in a neat glass phial; and the liquid once poured into the open cup of *application*, once exposed to the action of another air, had begun to turn from green to red, or whatever, and might, for all he knew, be on its way to purple, to black, to yellow.

(21, xii; James’s italics).

Here, we notice, it is from the colour “green” that Strether’s subjectivity begins to turn — “whatever” dye it might take in the long run. The author’s im-

age of “green” is intentional; yet, at the same time, what hue the protagonist is to assume should be arbitrary. It is not simply the stage setting of “France” or “outside-Woollett” that the “action of another air” or the “open cup of *ap- plication*” might indicate; it is also the reader that can be an “open” topos where his colour will be freely changed.

Some critics regard Strether’s “name” on the Review’s cover as the very representation of his lack of identity and, especially among discussions on the sexual politics, have a tendency to consider his marginality as a fixed one;¹² yet more problematic is where his name is located. The critics who literally read the cover’s function will also literally read the blindness of the protagonist who tries literally to read the cover’s colour. Although his literalism is based upon the same kind of blindness as his insistency upon the literal by which he reads Maria Gostrey’s pasteboard, the operation of ambassadorship functionally deviates him from the literal into the metaphoric. While “the name on the cover” seems simply to elucidate the ironic lack of his worldly reputation, “the cover with the name” suggests, through the eloquent sign “green”, the author’s own image of his hero, the metaphoric process by which the ambassador’s subjectivity is fluidly constructed, and possibilities of our “open” reading of the text.

NOTES

- 1 Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 63.
- 2 Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (Charles Scribner’s New York Edition of 1909; reprint in New York: Augustus Kelly, 1971): vol. 21, p. 84. Subsequent citations in the text are to volume and page numbers in this edition (vols. 21 & 22).
- 3 Julie Rivkin, “The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*”. *PMLA* 101 (1986): 825.
- 4 Julie Rivkin’s formulation of “the logic of delegation” is based upon the Derridean theory of “supplementation”; that is, the critic identifies the presence of the ambassador with the paradoxical logic of supplementarity — what adds onto, also subtracts from, or reveals a lack in, the original.
- 5 Stuart Hutchinson, *Henry James: An American as Modernist* (London:

- Vision Press, 1982), 78.
- 6 David McWhirter, *Desire and Love in Henry James: A Study of the Late Novels* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40.
 - 7 Nicola Bradbury, *Henry James: The Later Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 46.
 - 8 Merle A. Williams, *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel: Being and Seeing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 68.
 - 9 Rivkin, "The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*": 825.
 - 10 M. R. Ridley ed., *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare: Othello*. Seventh Edition (London: Methuen, 1969), III-iii: 169-71.
 - 11 *ibid.*, III-iii: 193-96.
 - 12 See especially Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Kelly Cannon, *Henry James and Masculinity: The Man at the Margins* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).