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Phenomenology of the Closet: Cultural, Sexual and Textual (Dis) Orientation in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*

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‘...but Strether saw he must none the less make a choice and take a line.’¹

‘For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return.’²

Introduction: Phenomenology and (Dis) Orientation

In seeing that he must ‘make a choice and take a line’, Lambert Strether implicitly brings to the reader’s attention a multiplicity of ‘lines’ crisscrossing the narrative world of Henry James’s 1903 novel *The Ambassadors*. Lines, for Strether, are choices, and to choose a particular line is to follow a particular path that may lead in unexpected directions.

Following this thread one quickly becomes aware of different types of lines present in *The Ambassadors*: lines of paths (travelling between cultures), lines of desire (to whom

¹ Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (1994), 217. Cited hereon in the text.

² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), 21.

one *directs* one's desire), and lines of prose (the style of the literary lines which comprise *The Ambassadors*). Reading James's novel along these lines – the cultural, sexual, and textual – points not only to sex, texts, and contexts, but also to ethical questions, such as 'How should one live?'³ Formulating this question as 'Which line should one take?' – as does Strether – reorients the critical discourse on James's novel from the metaphysical/epistemological perspective of an unfolding consciousness to a directional/phenomenological perspective. Towards whom does Strether orient himself? Alternatively, what if Strether cannot find a line by which to orient himself and so succumbs to – or seeks – *disorientation*?

While the influential queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick documents what she calls the 'epistemological privilege of unknowing,'⁴ her own work can be seen to privilege epistemology. This privileging of epistemology over phenomenology is indicative of a wider trend in queer literary scholarship associated with the remarkable influence of Sedgwick's own study *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), which made questions about knowledge and gaps in that knowledge the presiding critical matrix for the exploration of (homo)sexuality in literature. Yet this fruitful line of work has come at the expense of engagement with phenomenology,⁵ which holds the potential to productively investigate the uniquely spatial dimensions of sexuality suggested by the

³ This is the question with which Martha Nussbaum (1990) begins her 'projected literary–ethical inquiry.'

⁴ Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (1993), 23.

⁵ It is important to note, however, that Sedgwick herself (always one step ahead) identifies this bias towards epistemology. Her later work, *Touching Feeling*, is consequently concerned with 'texture' as 'a promising level of attention for shifting the emphasis of some interdisciplinary conversations away from the recent fixation on epistemology (which suggests performativity / performance can show us whether or not there are essential truths and how we could, or why we can't, know them) by asking new questions about phenomenology and affect (what motivates performativity and performance, for example, and what individual and collective effects are mobilized in their execution?)' (17).

very spatial terms used to describe it: *orientation* and, in particular, *queer*, ‘a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a “straight line,” a sexuality that is bent and crooked.’⁶ This is not to delegitimize the epistemological perspective, which has usefully elaborated how preterition⁷ or ‘the formal complexity involved with making the unspoken an absence that could be recognized as such,’⁸ and that ‘twilight zone of signification called connotation,’⁹ have all produced spaces – in the form of gaps, omissions, absences, and ambiguities – wherein which may reside non-normative sexualities or expressions of gender. However, moving from epistemological to phenomenological gaps, omissions, absences, and ambiguities allows us to ‘explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures.’¹⁰ Identities are not consciousnesses with feet, but rather are situated in bodies that gesture, walk paths, take turns, and are oriented in the world.

Turning to James, we find that the language of ‘orientation’ permeates much critical writing on *The Ambassadors*. Indeed, many scholars cannot avoid recourse to the language of deferral, deviation, delegation, supplementarity, or anti-mimeticism, all of which react against the possibility of the ‘straight growth, direct speech, and exact replication’¹¹ James invokes in the novel’s preface. This orientation toward orientations is all the more surprising given the extent to which critical writing on *The Ambassadors* inflected by queer theory does *not* consider the role of *sexual* orientation.¹² To address

⁶ Ahmed (2006), 67.

⁷ Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology* (2008), 201-212.

⁸ Natasha Hurley, ‘Before and Beyond Queer Theory’ (2008), 315.

⁹ Eric Savoy, ‘Entre Chein et Loup’ (2007), 103.

¹⁰ Ahmed (2006), 56. Phenomenology is not new to James studies: Armstrong (1983), Rowe (1985), Posnock (1991), Williams (1993), Meissner (1999), and numerous other critics all look at ‘experience and perception’ as ‘vehicles of knowledge’. Stylistically, phenomenology is most often tied to explanations of James’s literary impressionism rather than the *readerly* disorientation enacted by his syntax or narrative structure.

¹¹ Julie Rivkin, *False Positions* (1996), 68.

¹² Haralson (2003) focuses on masculinity while Stevens (1998) references *The Ambassadors* only in his introduction and conclusion.

this curious void it is helpful to ‘turn’ to what Sara Ahmed calls ‘queer phenomenology,’ a theoretical subfield of queer theory that offers an ‘approach to the very question of what it means to “orientate” oneself sexually toward some others and not other others.’¹³ In her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Ahmed considers how norms governing legitimate lines of desire orient individuals towards socially constructed and accepted life paths: namely, the heterosexual ‘straight’ line. A queer phenomenology helps lay bare these lines – often in the form of harmful habits of thought – that direct (as directives) the social behaviour of individuals in order to ‘[redirect] our attention toward different objects, those that are “less proximate” or even those that deviate or are deviant.’¹⁴ It is the culturally, sexually, and textually deviant moments in *The Ambassadors* which this essay will seek to trace in order to consider the ‘orientation’ of Lambert Strether and the answer it may offer to the questions: ‘How should one live? Which line should one take?’

Culture: Lines and Paths

The role of space – the traditional object of investigation for phenomenology – is emphasized in *The Ambassadors* by the rigour with which James characterizes places, which are ‘space[s] to which meaning has been ascribed.’¹⁵ The binary logic James uses to differentiate Woollett, Massachusetts and Paris, France present them as cultures at odds: Protestant/Catholic, ‘fine cold thought’ (299)/imagination, New World/Old World, work/leisure. Even the division of the novel into Part I/Part II encourages the reader to think through a this/that mentality. In line with this, the title *The Ambassadors* invokes

¹³ Ahmed (2006), 68.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ Carter et al., *Space and Place* (1993), xii.

cross-cultural dialogue: sending an individual who represents one place to carry a message to another place only to return to the home he or she represents, in the process further reifying the lines that divide those two cultural spaces by enacting the gesture of return. Culture, in this view of things, becomes increasingly naturalized and entrenched the more it is performed: ‘We follow the line that is followed by others: the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which “we” emerge.’¹⁶ The more familiar a path, the more taken for granted the origin point from which it emanates, the harder it is to see that other paths are available. Ahmed’s characterization of lines followed by others as having disappearing origins makes sense of ‘tunnel vision’ – and the narrowness it describes – as a metaphor for ideology, which Stuart Hall defines as ‘the winning of a universal validity and legitimacy for accounts of the world which are partial and particular...’¹⁷ Emerging from Woollett and entering Paris, Strether is a test case for the power wielded by his home’s ‘partial and particular’ worldview to keep him on the ‘straight and narrow’ cultural line and back again.

In *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature and the Ways to ‘Culture’, 1800-1918* (1993) James Buzard provides a useful way of thinking through attitudes to culture and acculturation during the time James was writing. Buzard describes the distinction between tourism and travel: the former is directed by industry, emphasizes ‘familiarity’ over ‘novelty’, validates the tourist’s ‘prior view of the world’ and generally relies on conventionality.¹⁸ The tourist, that is, treads the beaten track, following the footsteps of prior tourists and encountering mostly ‘the familiar.’ Travel, on the other hand, responds negatively to all these elements of tourism and the superficial relationship to culture they belie; as such, Buzard sees the discourse of *travel* as predicated on ‘anti-

¹⁶ Ahmed (2006), 15.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Ideology’ (1982), 61.

¹⁸ James Buzard, *The Beaten Track* (1993), 3.

tourist rhetoric' that represents the *tourist* as 'the sinister or parodic double to many modern wishes about culture and acculturation.'¹⁹ What is most fascinating in Buzard's account is the assumption, underlying both tourist and anti-tourist rhetoric, that proper, authentic, and *total* acculturation is a socially valorized ideal toward which all should strive. Adherence to the precincts of a given culture is assumed as the only viable way to reside in the world. In his 1878 essay 'Occasional Paris' James reveals his uneasy relationship to cosmopolitanism, attributing the 'spirit of the cosmopolite' to the 'uncomfortable consequence of seeing many lands and feeling at home in none'. Rather, James says, 'the ideal should be to be a concentrated patriot.'²⁰ This residence – being 'at home' in a particular culture – gains ethical and moral value in that it provides an answer to the 'how should one live?' question: in accordance with the familiar.

The narrative action of *The Ambassadors* originates in Mrs. Newsome's suspicion that Chad has succumbed to the worst danger a traveller may face: the forgetting of his proper place and origin, and a failure to enact the 'gesture of return' to the familiar – in short, a cultural death. Having left the land of 'fine cold thought' (299) and his future career in business, Chad remains for an extended period of time in Paris, rejecting the path Mrs. Newsome had in mind for him. Strether first sees Chad's behavior through the eyes of Woollett, believing the young man had in Paris 'a chance, unchecked, to strike his roots, had paved the way for initiations more direct and more deep. It was Strether's belief that he had been comparatively innocent before this first migration...'
(66). Migration and innocence are set at odds, and it is in this context that Strether is sent to straighten the situation. As Julie Rivkin argues,

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

²⁰ Henry James, 'Occasional Paris' (1878), 128-129.

Hired to mediate between mother and son, between American and European cultural and economic practices, Strether is asked to perform a mission that restores propriety as much as property, sexual as well as commercial fidelity...²¹

Agreeing, Sheila Teahan adds the observation that Strether's name 'puns conspicuously on "straight" and "straighter."' ²² To the extent that Strether's mission is to bring Chad 'in line' with the heterosexual, rational, Protestant work ethic narrative embodied in Mrs. Newsome, he stays, at first, 'in line' with the 'straightness' of his name. After all, Mrs. Newsome represents Woollett and Strether represents Mrs. Newsome, and, since 'everything in [Mrs. Newsome's] world must be "straight,"' ²³ so too must Strether.

Like straight lines, the origins of which disappear, Strether admits to Maria Gostrey that while in Woollett he took 'the whole moral and intellectual being or block' of Mrs. Newsome, though 'somehow over there [he] didn't quite know it' (300). While immersed in the world of his home he sees only one path. Upon first sight of Chad at the opera, however, Strether's own vision begins to perceive in ways he never thought possible:

He had never in his life seen a young man come into a box at ten o'clock at night, and would... have scarce been ready to pronounce as to different ways of doing so... [H]e had on the spot and without the least trouble of intention taught Strether that even in so small a thing as that there were different ways. (91)

Chad represents for Strether the 'new,' that which he has never before seen. More importantly, Chad 'teaches' Strether that alternative 'ways' – paths – of doing things exist. Shortly after having been taught this lesson, Strether questions Little Bilham on the 'queer impression' of Chad's diplomacy: 'as if instead of really giving ground his line

²¹ Rivkin (1998), 66.

²² Sheila Teahan, *Rhetorical Logic* (1995), 99.

²³ Martha Nussbaum, 'Perceptive Equilibrium' (1990), 177.

were to keep me on here and set me a bad example' (112). The example is 'bad' because it deviates from the course set by Mrs. Newsome. It is queer – twisted, crooked – in its failed adherence to the kind of 'straight' line represented by Waymarsh, whose 'angle' during his stay in Europe was that of 'a persona established in a railway-coach with a forward inclination' (30). Further, keeping Strether 'here', in Paris, is a 'bad example' because it delays the gesture of return and so fails to perform through reproduction the cultural lines originating in Woollett. Ultimately, Strether refuses to carry out his ambassadorial mission, opting instead to urge Chad *not* to return to his place of origin and instead remain off the beaten track: 'He came in,' says Strether, 'to tell me he was ready—ready, I mean, to return. And he went off, after ten minutes with me, to say he wouldn't' (193).

Sexuality: Lines of Desire

In landscape architecture the term 'desire line' is used 'to describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow.' Such deviation, Ahmed explains, 'can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. Such lines are indeed traces of desire; where people have taken different routes to get to this point or to that point.'²⁴ The architectural metaphor of 'desire lines' draws to the surface how in James's writing desires can lead one astray from the 'straight' or direct path and onto non-normative paths. The cultural/physical disorientation of swerving off the 'beaten track' then belongs to the same matrix as the sexual/psychical disorientation involved in following alternative lines of desire. The paths we travel are more connected to the

²⁴ Ahmed (2006), 19-20.

sexualities we subscribe to than might at first be obvious; as Ruth Vanita writes, ‘stories about same-sex desire involve selves changed through travel.’²⁵ Indeed, an important aspect of the disorientation of ‘changed selves’ is that its affects slip between different registers of life. To be disoriented in one way is to have one’s entire world turn askew: ‘sexual disorientation,’ says Ahmed, ‘slides quickly into social disorientation, *as a disorientation in how things are arranged.*’²⁶ Thus along paths of travel can run lines of desire and ‘when people travel so do ideas.’²⁷

Yet it has been argued that at the time James was writing *The Ambassadors* what constituted an ‘accepted’ sexual path was becoming more powerfully normalized. In line with Foucault’s important thesis in *The History of Sexuality* that in the 19th century the homosexual becomes ‘a species,’²⁸ Eric Haralson explains how ‘late Victorian science and jurisprudence sought to establish as a fact of nature and a cornerstone of culture the dyad hetero/homo, with its distinct ethical, psychological, and physiological antitheses...’²⁹ Ahmed unveils the phenomenological implications of this historical narrative:

the transformation of sexual orientation into “a species” involves the translation of “direction” into identity. If sexual orientation is understood as something one “has,” such that one “is” what one “has,” then what one “is” becomes defined in terms of the direction of one’s desire, as an attraction that pulls one toward others.³⁰

The others towards which one ought to be pulled increasingly fell under the purview of biology, psychology, sexology, and a new ‘medico-juridical discourse,’ as part of a trend

²⁵ Ruth Vanita, ‘Homoerotics of Travel’ (1998), 99.

²⁶ Ahmed (2006), 162.

²⁷ Vanita (1998), 99.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Sexuality* (1978), 43.

²⁹ Eric Haralson, ‘Changing Ideas’ (2012), 172.

³⁰ Ahmed (2006), 69-70.

during James's lifetime that saw 'both the political stakes and the ideological bearings of sex...systematically ratcheted up to an unprecedented degree...' ³¹ That is, the line becomes tauter as it is 'taught' more forcefully through not only the medico-juridical discourse but also through performance and repetition. The 'tautness' of the line, connected to its straightness, naturalizes it: 'the naturalization of heterosexuality involves the presumption that there is a straight line that leads each sex toward the other sex, *and that this "line of desire" is "in line" with one's sex.*' ³² Lines of desire are culturally policed and the line that returns one straight 'home' also points to the opposite sex.

The heteronormativity of origins finds perhaps its most iconic textual embodiment in the Garden of Eden story in Genesis, one of the great pre-texts of Western culture. Given the signifying power of the Edenic pre-text, it is not insignificant that 'in the beginning' of Strether's journey he walks in a garden with Maria Gostrey, whom he calls an 'original woman' and who is the source of all Strether's 'knowledge' (27). Thematically, the use of this pre-text establishes the story as one concerning curiosity, (self)knowledge, and transgression; structurally, the appropriation of the creation story positions the text as determined to impose order and provide explanation. Importantly, though, it also reifies the heteronormativity of origins, both the beginning of knowledge and new life. The pre-text forces its explanation on the reader through its familiarity, for 'familiarity is what is, as it were, given, and which in being given "gives" the body the capacity to be oriented in this way or in that.' ³³ As readers, we invest in the familiarity of this pretext because, 'such investments "promise" return (if we follow this line, then "this or "that" will follow)...Through such investments in the promise of return, subjects

³¹ Haralson (1998), 177-178.

³² Ahmed (2006), 70-71.

³³ Ibid., 7.

*reproduce the lines that they follow.*³⁴ Like Mrs. Newsome, we desire to ‘straighten’ the future of the text by having it fall in line with the expectations suggested by the pre-text, which gestures towards a familiar textual world. The straightness Mrs. Newsome desires and the straightness imposed on a narrative through an Edenic pre-text are both wedded to a sexually ‘straight’ orientation that sees a heterosexual origin as a familiar social investment. In a sense, the origin from which one departs is always Eden – the ultimate beginning and the heterosexual ur-story – and if Adam could return ‘home’ it would be to Eve, not Steve.

As we have seen, the repetition of the line – a reification of that path as the only viable one – is enforced through a system of social rewards where investing in a line promises a return, thus reproducing the lines followed. However, the ‘promise’ of return to the familiar is complicated in the case of Strether, who makes the gesture of return, but does so hesitantly. The question becomes not ‘does Strether return home’ but rather ‘does Strether return home *directly*?’ This directness is vital:

The etymology of “direct” relates to “being straight” or getting “straight to the point.” To go directly is to follow a line without a detour, without mediation... To follow a line might be a way of becoming straight, by not deviating at any point.³⁵

Failing to ‘take a line’ directly can itself be a form of going ‘offline’ in that it questions the promise of return and what that return stands for. Part of the ‘social investment’ of taking a line is to fall in line with that society’s notions of normative sexuality. If to follow a line, as Ahmed notes, is to become ‘straight’, then is to delay approaching that line the same as resisting – temporarily – the pull of heterosexuality?

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

³⁵ Ibid., 16.

Hesitancy toward the ‘straight’ line necessitates some recognition of that line’s constructed authority and, as a result, awareness of the presence of alternative lines. When the direct line is no longer naturalized – much like heterosexuality – and can be recognized as a history falsely sedimented, rendered insidiously invisible, this is a queer moment:

It is worth, then, rereading the “perverted” as that which “turns astray” or moves off the straight line. The straight line would be that which moves *without any deviation* toward the “point” of heterosexual union or sexual coupling: any acts that postpone the heterosexual union are perverse...insofar as [they risk] “uncoupling” desire and reproduction...³⁶

So, in postponing ‘aiming’ himself toward heterosexual union, Strether ‘turns astray,’ is ‘perverted’ and ‘deviant’. The very *pause* Strether takes in deciding whether or not to straighten Chad’s cultural course is what partially forces his delay in returning to his heterosexual point of union/origin in Woollett. The *cultural* disorientation initiated by Chad thus slips into *sexual* disorientation, lending credence to Daniel Boorstin’s claim that ‘[t]ravel has been the universal catalyst.’³⁷

Style: Lines of Prose

The language of directionality permeates James’s preface to *The Ambassadors*. We learn of the work’s ‘straight growth’ and ‘direct speech’: mimetically, imagistically, plot-wise, this will be a ‘direct’ route to representational accuracy. But scholars such as Julie Rivkin and Sheila Teahan reveal this projected ‘directness’ as untenable given the exigencies of the plot and the writing process. The theme *and stylistics* of delay is enacted in the first

³⁶ Ibid., 78.

³⁷ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (1985), 79, cited in Buzzard (1993), 3.

chapters of the book – just after, that is, James’s remarks in the preface about the directness of the tale. Much as Strether avoids ‘straightening’ Chad’s cultural path, and hesitates before proceeding down the normative sexual path, so too does the text which bears him, from the outset, perform its preference for the deviant and the hesitant over the straight and direct. Thus the belatedness which Kevin Ohi calls ‘a recurrent – perhaps simply the primary – figure in the text’³⁸ is not only a *figure in the text*, but a *feature of the lines of prose that constitute it*. Reading sexuality through the deviant narrative and syntactic lines in *The Ambassadors* requires a kind of ‘queer phenomenological formalism’ attuned to how language is connected to direction at its very core – signifier directs us to what is signified – and how when mimesis breaks down it is the workings of language itself which deviate and are deviant.

Ohi, for example, explains how the ‘the disorienting effects of James’s style’ embody an ‘anti-mimetic understanding of representation...’:

his late style – not only its famous density and obscurity of reference, but also its characteristic disorientations of intelligibility, from its sudden alternations of tone and voice to its mixing of linguistic registers in favored tropes such as syllepsis or zeugma... – puts into practice this anti-mimetic theory.³⁹

Natasha Hurley provides a similar compendium of the disorienting techniques used by James, whose writing she sees as characterized by ‘a cornucopia of absences, a plenitude of detailed layerings, and mystifying partial points of view.’⁴⁰ What Eric Savoy calls ‘queer formalism’ – an ‘analytic practice that understands “queer” as signifying the close reading of complex, highly connotative discourse in the field of incoherent sexuality’⁴¹ – illuminates the ways in which James’s ‘mystifying’ lines of prose defer meaning in much

³⁸ Kevin Ohi, ‘Belatedness and Style’ (2007), 139.

³⁹ Ibid., 127, 128-129.

⁴⁰ Hurley (2008), 321.

⁴¹ Savoy (2007), 118.

the same way as Strether defers following the lines of sexual and cultural expectation set for him. The deferral of return and its associative estranging effects provide an analogue to James's disorienting style: sentences may arch and curl around a subject, defer uniting subject and verb or verb and object to such a degree that when the sentence is complete (when it returns to its beginning to offer a unity) the equivocations and elaborations, deferrals and deviations, the prolonged subordinated clauses listing elements of this or that, layering descriptions one upon the other, have rendered unfamiliar – indeed, sometimes unrecognizable – the readerly expectations established near the beginning.

Once a sentence is freed in this way from monolithic signification, and instead enacts postponement, it inhabits a realm of potentiality. And it is in the *pause* of the sentence – usually the subordinated clause between two dashes – that the pleasure of a potential deviation is felt. The pleasure of pausing is established very early in the narrative as constitutive of Strether's character:

The tortuous wall – girdle, long since snapped, of the little swollen city, half held in place by careful civic hands – wanders in narrow file between parapets smoothed by peaceful generations, pausing here and there for a dismantled gate or a bridged gap, with rises and drops, steps up and steps down, queer twists, queer contacts, peeps into homely streets and under the brows of gables, views of cathedral tower and waterside fields, of huddled English town and ordered English country. Too deep almost for words was the delight of these things to Strether; yet as deeply mixed with it were certain images of his inward picture. (24)

The 'tortuous wall' is personified: it 'wanders,' 'peeps,' 'views,' 'pausing here and there' for this and that. As 'these things' are mixed with 'images of [Strether's] inward picture' it is fair to say that the person the wall personifies is our protagonist. As such, the 'queer twists' and 'queer contacts' of the wall, which appears to turn this way and that in order to 'view' as much as possible, align *Strether* with a 'deviant' seeking alternative paths

and *his impressions* – ‘too deep almost for words’ – with the anti-mimetic, deviant impulse of James’s writing. This passage is an example of the way in which throughout *The Ambassadors* Strether ‘remains the figure for the necessary figurative turns and errors that accompany all acts of exchange and representation.’⁴² Hurley makes a wonderful comparison pertinent to the above sentence: ‘Sexuality, we might say, is just as mysterious as any seemingly endless sentence from a late James novel: we don’t really know where it comes from or why.’⁴³ Not knowing where a sentence comes from is an explicit rejection of its origins and consequently of the (normative) teleology that origins inaugurate; similarly, then, not knowing where sexuality comes from opens it up to alternative futures – ‘queer twists.’

We might also think of where a *novel* comes from. Queer formalism, attentive as it is to linking formal elements of ambiguity to sexuality, has been less interested in how the formal elements of plot and the writing process similarly disorient the reader and author. That is, the kind of disorientation described above concerns not only prose lines, but also the lines along which the novel is constructed and of the tradition it extends. James questions from the outset the validity or possibility of his writing a ‘typical’ novel, governed by uncomplicated ideas of mimesis and predicated on predictable plot lines:

James's disposition to contest the new order of things is profoundly a predisposition already evident in the notebook jottings...: it is a given that Strether will “not in the least” be carnally tempted or fall in love.⁴⁴

James wants to disorient or at the least differently orient the novel tradition, and his theory of the novel, Ohi argues, ‘disrupts the possibility of reifying the novel.’⁴⁵ Ohi

⁴² Rivkin (1996), 67.

⁴³ Hurley (2008), 321.

⁴⁴ Haralson (1998), 178-179.

⁴⁵ Kevin Ohi, ‘On the Queerness of Style’ (2006), 144.

shows how James's theory refuses to be the 'origin' of a line of influence that proscribes a path to be followed.

Yet, as we know, disorientation of one kind slides quickly into other kinds of disorientation: thus by *intentionally* deviating from the novel tradition James ends up *unintentionally* deviating from his own intentions for his novel. In a brilliant analysis of the role of delegation and ambassadorship in *The Ambassadors* using Derrida's concept of 'supplementarity', Julie Rivkin shows how,

[i]n the preface, James rewrites the novel's tale of deviation from authority and of mediation of experience as the story of the novel's own composition...By supplementing the novel with the story of its composition, the preface also inevitably hints at the intended novel that never got written.⁴⁶

The intended novel that never got written is, in a sense, akin to the life that Strether never lived: 'the process of substitution and deviation that has engulfed [Strether] since the novel's first sentence, is in fact the life he has been seeking.'⁴⁷ Thus James writes in an important passage from the preface about 'the matter of the noted inevitable deviation (from too fond an original vision) that the exquisite treachery even of the straightest execution may ever be trusted to inflict even on the most mature plan...' (14). The 'straight' execution from an 'original' vision is the heterosexual line emanating from Eden as well as the line of the 'concentrated patriot' running from Mrs. Newsome in Wollett to Paris, and back again. Strether, veering from the line of cultural expectations, redirects the plot from its intended direction: the 'deviation from his appointed task, figured as a "revolution"...marks a turn or non sequiter in the novel's narrative and causal line' which is further 'duplicated by the novel's deviation from the germ identified

⁴⁶ Rivkin (1996), 60.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 77.

in James's notebook entries...⁴⁸ This seemingly endless proliferation of deviations supports James's invocation of the *inevitability* of deviation, which suggests something structural about the contingency of the 'straight' line. Could it be that as modernity picks up steam it comes closer and closer to veering off the tracks? If deviation is *inevitable* is it possible to talk about a 'right' path at all? For 'to name a deviation as inevitable is surely to put in question its status as a deviation.'⁴⁹

As Ahmed says, "getting lost" still takes us somewhere; and being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar...⁵⁰ The chain of disorientations I have traced – from cultural to sexual to stylistic, and from the novel tradition to a novel's execution – slide yet again into another deviation: that of the reader. The writing of Henry James, argues Ohi,

continually throws a *reader* off balance with disorienting mixings of register and sudden shifts of tone, with unexpected syntactical inversions and equivocal reifications that hover at indeterminate levels of abstraction, with pronouns that divide their allegiances between any number of more or less distant antecedents...⁵¹

Indeed, Ruth Yeazell notes the feeling of 'epistemological vertigo'⁵² induced by James's writing. An example of such vertigo is the way *The Ambassadors* establishes the reader, like Mrs. Newsome, as an absent observer whose access to the events are mediated by 'text' and who strives to 'straighten' the meaning of these events as they unfold. Mrs. Newsome gains her knowledge of what is happening in Paris through Strether's letters just as the reader knows what happens through the text which ostensibly conveys Strether's unfolding consciousness. If Strether is indeed writing Mrs. Newsome

⁴⁸ Teahan (1995), 98.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁰ Ahmed (2006), 7.

⁵¹ Ohi (2006), 140, emphasis added.

⁵² Ruth Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge* (1976), 71, quoted in Ohi (2006), 152, note 3.

frequently to explain what is happening then a version of the whole narrative the reader has before him or her thus also circulates *within* the text that constitutes it, in the form of letters which we know are incomplete, which leave things out which our ‘fine cold thought’ (299) desires to uncover or solve. While Strether refuses to fulfill Mrs. Newsome’s expectations, he equally – and perhaps as intentionally – fails to fulfill the reader’s expectations by omitting information required to comprehend in a ‘direct’ way the signifying logic of his story. As such, the unnamed item manufactured in Woollett – rich as it is in unrealized signifying potential – represents both the narrative’s deviation from the reader and Strether’s deviation from Mrs. Newsome.

Wolfgang Iser’s phenomenological approach to reader-response criticism provides the best framework for understanding the disorientation of the reader encountering James’s *The Ambassadors*. Iser emphasizes the importance of the reader’s imagination in the meaning-making process:

it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself.⁵³

Through the reader’s imagination – which aligns the reader now with Strether, who has ‘treasures of imagination’ (301) – he or she will strive to make sense of the absolute coherence found wanting in the text, ‘and yet in supplying all the missing links, he must think in terms of experiences different from his own; indeed, it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience that the reader can truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers him.’⁵⁴ Or, as Iser later states, ‘our faculty for

⁵³ Wolfgang Iser, ‘The Reading Process’ (1980), 55.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

deciphering *cannot be along our own lines of orientation.*⁵⁵ There are thus as many possible avenues of meaning-making for any given text as there are readers, the sum total of whose imaginative reconstructions constitute the text's horizon of meanings.

Discussing the individual nature of the reading process, Iser writes, 'two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The "stars" in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable.'⁵⁶ These 'lines' are the possible paths of interpretation that become available when readerly expectations are disoriented, they are the dizzying vertigo one feels when staring straight up at a constellation and turning until it forms a new image, telling a new story. Such dizziness is the mark of a 'good' text: the imagination's impulse to seek pattern and familiarity and the text's impulse to avoid this explanatory gesture through 'elements of indeterminacy'⁵⁷ establish 'the inherent nonachievement of balance [as] a prerequisite for the very dynamism of the operation [of reading]'.⁵⁸ This nonachievement of balance is about disorientation and reorientation and the possibility for new experiences they hold:

The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar. What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation. And it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences.⁵⁹

The reader now joins ranks with Strether and James, who, like the reader-as-meaning-maker, are both writers and readers: James's re-reads his own writing in his prefaces and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 68, emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 64.

Strether reads and writes letters. As reader-response shows how the reader is part of the writing or ‘meaning-making’ process, all three subjects – James, Strether, and the reader – both read and write and are disoriented.

Hesitation, Imagination, and Ethics: Perceptive Disequilibrium

Form and content, argues Martha Nussbaum, must be considered when ethical questions are at stake, for far too little attention has been paid to the ‘ethical commitment’⁶⁰ of stylistic choices. In response, she calls for an ‘investigation of that which is expressed and “claimed” by the shape of the sentences themselves, by images and cadences and pauses themselves, by the forms of the traditional genres, by narrativity, themselves.’⁶¹ The reader-response criticism of Iser helps unite style (in its effect on the reader) with ethical concerns: if we reorient once more our guiding question from the prescriptive ‘How should one live? Which lines should one take?’ to the open ended ‘How *can* one live? Which lines *are available*?’ we see that *The Ambassadors* enacts the performance of these questions *in the reader* by forcing the imagination to acknowledge new lines of experience as part of the meaning-making process. While Iser would say this is an aspect of all literature, the remarkable prevalence of disorienting stylistic elements in James’s writing elaborated by Hurley, Ohi, and queer formalism more broadly – and which reveal the gaps necessary to engage the imagination in the formation of new lines of experience – make James an exemplary instance of this general law. Iser’s phenomenological account of the reading process is not all that different from Nussbaum’s ethical account of the reading process: ‘...our interest in literature becomes,’ writes Nussbaum, ‘...an

⁶⁰ Nussbaum (1990), 186.

⁶¹ Ibid., 192.

interest in finding out (by seeing and feeling the otherwise perceiving) what possibilities...life offers to us...'⁶²

Read a little closer, however, Nussbaum's pseudo-reader-response analysis does not provide as attuned an account of the reading process as does Iser's phenomenologically-influenced understanding, leading her to misread the relationship between sight and desire/passion in Strether's character. For a time she gestures, tentatively, toward a qualification of the merits of balance and orientation and even elevates disorientation, asking, '[s]hould we indeed aim at a condition of balance or equilibrium?...Should we in fact exclude our bewilderment and our hesitation from the deliberative process?'⁶³ As we have seen, hesitation and disorientation are the cornerstones supporting alternative routes: so far so good. Furthermore, Nussbaum goes on to claim – in accordance with numerous other commentators – that 'hesitation and bewilderment are a part of [Strether's] sense of life' and 'may actually be marks of fine attention.'⁶⁴ Nussbaum, along the lines of Rivkin, Teahan, and Ohi on one hand, and Iser's reader-response on the other, identifies hesitancy and imagination, respectively, as constitutive of Strether's (moral) character. Finally, Nussbaum provides a valuable qualification of Strether's 'fine attention' born of hesitation and bewilderment by noting his 'inability to see...the sexual love of Chad and Marie de Vionnet; his inability to see Maria Gostrey's deepening feeling for him; his failure to examine and to acknowledge his own complicated feelings for Marie de Vionnet, and his jealousy of Chad.'⁶⁵ This observation demonstrates the powerful pull of Woollett and the gesture of return it demands – the strength of the tether tying Strether to the straighter path.

⁶² Ibid., 171.

⁶³ Ibid., 175.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 181, 182.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 187.

Yet Nussbaum ultimately falls back on a form of orientation by recognizing the ‘balance and power’⁶⁶ of the novel; this alignment of balance with power is peculiar coming shortly after questioning the desirability of aiming ‘at a condition of balance or equilibrium’. More problematic, however, is Nussbaum’s bewildering claim that passion narrows vision such that the ethical commitment of ‘perceptive equilibrium’ is not tenable: ‘the recognition that there is a view of the world from passion’s point of view, and that this view is closed to the perceiver, shows us that perception is, even by its own lights, incomplete.’⁶⁷ But when Iser’s phenomenological account of the reading process interjects, we again see how disorientation from the normative course, caused by the pull of desire, *liberates* Strether from tunnel vision rather than *limits* his sight in the way that ‘love’ apparently does. Queer phenomenology shows not that passion’s point of view – the pull of ‘desire lines’ to orient us towards different, queer paths – is incomplete, but rather that the (hetero)normative line set out for the perceiver, and the train-track-tunnel-vision it demands, is incomplete and narrow in its straightness. And though Nussbaum seems to reject or imply the impossibility of ‘a life that combines fine perception with the silence and the hidden vision of love,’ the vision of this she does offer fits Strether very well: ‘it would only be in a condition that is not itself “equilibrium” at all, but an unsteady oscillation between blindness and openness, exclusivity and general concern, fine reading of life and the immersion of love.’⁶⁸ Disorientation caused by the pull of non-normative desire is what allows for a finer, richer reading of life (the visibility of more paths) and a finer reading (leading to the imagination’s acquisition of new experiences) allows for the disorienting appearance of still more newly visible non-normative lines of desire.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 189.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 190.

Conclusion: A Phenomenology of the Closet

Having reached the end of the line, I see that conclusions are a kind of orienting device, directing the reader as they do to further lines of inquiry or offering a punch line for the lines of reasoning followed so far. And yet like Strether it is sometimes difficult not to fall in line; as such, it is fitting to end with – return to – Sedgwick, for it is with her that so much queer thinking originates: “‘Closetedness’ itself,’ she writes,

is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.⁶⁹

If the epistemology of the closet is performed as a negative speech act – the speech act of silence – then the phenomenology of the closet is performed as a gesture, the gesture of returning and repeating the normative ‘given’ path in order to ‘stay in line’. Crossing the line, in this view, is a form of coming out. These alternative lines must first be accessed through the imagination before the gesture can be performed physically in whatever form it is manifest. The imagination actively accessing new paths – the imagination of the reader – opens the phenomenological closet in ‘fits and starts,’ accruing slowly the potential deviations suspended in a pause before (re)turning to the beaten track. Leaving the phenomenological closet might, then, begin with *gestures of acknowledgment* that there are alternative, deviant lines, even if nevertheless maintaining the expected course.

Strether, I want to suggest, has one foot in the closet and one foot out at the moment of hesitation: if he were to deviate and follow an alternate line of desire, he would ‘come out of the closet’ to the extent that he embodies a non-normative (sexual)

⁶⁹ Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology* (1990), 3.

orientation. That he does go back to Woollett because he thinks it 'right' to do so (346) is a testament to the power of that traditional line and perhaps constitutes Strether's shutting the door. Further, I want to suggest that Nussbaum's Strether is more in the phenomenological closet than the Strether which queer phenomenology allows us to see – that is, a phenomenology which sees the potential of desire to unfold before us lines that we previously held to be nonexistent. If Strether is sent to straighten Chad, but instead desires to lead him astray from his line of cultural commitment, this is a 'queer desire' in its wish for a deviating, crooked path for another individual; Strether's queer desire disorients his own trajectory toward heterosexual union at Woollett, thus pulling into view alternate lines/lives. Strether's awareness that '...he must none the less make a choice and take a line' (217) is a gesture of acknowledgement.

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First Response

This essay is, simply stated, excellent. It provides a brilliant insight into Henry James's *The Ambassadors*; in doing so, it avoids reductive and deterministic deployments of the "queer", deploying it in its full complexity of spatial metaphor, one that make lines the site of normativity and resistance, and sex a semiotic of subjugation and subversion. Quite a few scholars and teachers in queer theory might want to read this, so as to have a better grasp of that elusive issue, the queer issue.