

# Hashtags, Algorithmic Compression, and Henry James's Late Style

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At first glance, linking Henry James with social media may seem a misguided, if not wholly absurd, proposition. We might contend that James needs no digital facelift to maintain his literary freshness. We might fear that if we juxtapose his lapidary prose with twenty-first century tweets, texts, and status updates, such a comparison will surely suggest aesthetic judgments not flattering to smartphone habitués (while exposing us to eye-rolling ridicule in the classroom). When considering the linguistic complexities absent in the blunt simplicity of the average tweet or text message, we may suspect that the social media user, as James claims of Guy de Maupassant, “has no window looking in that direction,” that social media discourages “that reflective part which governs conduct and produces character” (*FN* 205, 223). Yet it is difficult to justify a strict Jamesian binary between “fun” and “serious” communication, or a strict Jamesian association of brevity with superficiality and prolixity with complexity.<sup>1</sup> And if we value in James his linguistic microscopy—his patience in reconstructing infinitesimal connections among thought, conversation, and social relations—then such a project is hardly gratuitous. Indeed, identifying a common linguistic microscopy shared by James and by social media could invalidate ungenerous dismissals of social media by traditional humanists and of Henry James by resistant students. Such a move, I argue, constitutes the natural next stage of what David McWhirter has called “the postmodernization of Henry James” (“Modernist” 176) while trying to avoid the traps McWhirter identifies: sacrificing historical specificity and ignoring the critical heritage of James studies.

To avoid such pitfalls while continuing to contribute to the ongoing project of considering James as a “precursor of our postmodern condition” (Rowe 195), I would like to shift emphasis from the postmodern *condition* to the conditions of postmodern *conversation*. Focusing on the many-layered processes of digital exchanges will provide a new answer for Jonathan Freedman’s opening salvo in *The Cambridge*

*Companion to Henry James*: “Why, after a hundred years, Henry James?”—an answer connected to our present historical moment, which, saturated in smartphones and enmeshed in wifi signals, is no longer the “MTV-mediated age of instantaneous apprehension” (“Introduction” 1). Something slightly different—and more visibly Jamesian—is emerging, something that merits James’s observation that “so much of the ingenuity of the world goes to multiplying contact and communication, to reducing separation and distance, to promoting, in short, an inter-penetration that would have been the wonder of our fathers” (*EL* 664). With each Facebook update, Flickr upload, FourSquare check-in, or Twitter retweet, a social media user’s identity all the more resembles current critical accounts of Jamesian identity, with its “swarm of surrogates and replacements” (Lustig 126), its lack of “unified stability,” and its significance “as a locus of response and exchange” (Posnock 177, 170). Tellingly, McWhirter’s half-wistful, half-winking invocation of “those ill-behaved net-surfers who, one ambivalently hopes, haven’t all been driven away from the James List” (“Modernist” 183) underlines the exigency of considering the emerging norms of social media. As digital communication becomes a social given, will we choose to erect *cordons sanitaire* between Henry James and social media—or will we draw students and the public nearer to James by drawing parallels?

Part of this task has already been accomplished by Jamesian critics who have drawn historical links between two eras of profound change in communications technologies.<sup>2</sup> But these analogies being made between early twentieth-century new media and the twenty-first century ontological shifts engendered by social media represent only one of many approaches by which we can show James modeling critical engagement with social media. Beyond illuminating individual appearances of specific technologies within James’s oeuvre, we can also identify the underlying meaning-making protocols (codes) that Jamesian style natively shares with social media platforms. Revealing these formal parallels will not only return to questions that span across any phase in Jamesian criticism—questions about language itself—but will also update these questions to ask what James can do for us in the digital age, through what strikes me as the historically specific but not historically blinkered method of analyzing Jamesian style as a model for rapidly codifying social media practices. Certainly, my governing concept for this essay, compression—the effect made by digital-media strategies that “economize communication in the service of facilitating greater mobility” (Sterne 5)—has its roots in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> However, rather than delve into the shared historical context that James would have recognized and that led to today’s digital culture, I want to identify shared textual logics by outlining James’s theory of mediated conversation. This theory is not inherently tethered to any specific technology but to James’s late style and to his *Notebooks*, New York Edition prefaces, and literary criticism, which disclose a series of techniques that mirror the intellectual labor of social media users. In his fiction, too, James reveals how knowledge emerges by collating an array of messages produced by different communicative media: the conversation, the expression, the gesture, the letter, the telegram, silence. By dramatizing collation, James’s stylistic maximalism is a meta-minimalism: it paradoxically represents the process of achieving verbal economy through compressed expressions. Just as conversation and reflection provide James’s characters with raw data they analyze and convert into

brief, idiomatic hypotheses, so do social media users “square” the flood of messages continuously bubbling out of various platforms.

After all, the late style is not only comprised of the beautiful concatenations, sticky with qualifications and heavy with dependent clauses, that we have so much fun unpacking. James’s late style propels us toward abrupt epiphanies, abstract and unencumbered, idiomatic yet suggestive, whose brevity tests the carrying power of words much as a crash test assesses the strength of a car chassis or as a squirrel essays increasingly lofty tree branches. These epiphanic fragments used to crown long conversations between Kate Croy and Merton Densher, Fanny Assingham and Charlotte Stant, Louis Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey—so vividly conjured by the title of Marjorie Kaufman’s essay “They Knew That *He* Knew What He Knew”—are assembled from a relatively small group of pronouns and monosyllables. Taken out of context, they appear as free of content and complexity as the average text message, status update, or tweet, but to point out the abstraction that enables brevity is not tantamount to agreeing that James’s abstraction indicates an overwhelming preference for ambiguity and ambivalence over certainty and conclusion.<sup>4</sup> Like social media users, James’s characters—no matter how many tactics for deferral they engineer, no matter how much they gain by deploying cryptic allusions—ultimately want to “know.” The late novels thus oscillate between, on the one hand, reflective episodes dedicated to the quantitatively luxurious process of data collection and analysis and, on the other, dramatic episodes in which characters exchange short but meaningful statements that test the knowledge gathered during the reflective episodes. These compressed exclamations are, in other words, what Louis Lambert Strether might tweet, what Fanny Assingham might text, what Kate Croy might status-update. Certainly, for most digital utterances, the novel that could encompass them has not yet been written—much like “The Abasement of the Northmores,” whose never-published volume of letters like “loose blocks of marble” would have proven the terse Mr. Hope superior to the prolix Lord Northmore (*CT* 118). But that is precisely why social media users need James: the relationship between the extravagances of a Jamesian narrator and the terse ejaculations of characters in moments of clarity corresponds to the relationship between the manifest digital enunciations of social media and the larger context to which outsiders are typically not privy.

If the position of a tweet or text or status update within the sender’s life can be understood as analogous to the position of a Jamesian epiphanic exchange within the larger narrative system of the novel, the specific formal technique that underlies this parallel is compression. By “compression,” I refer to “the technique of removing redundant data” used by digital media to reduce file sizes and quicken communication and data transfer (*Sterne* 2). To show how James’s oeuvre can serve new purposes in the context of social media, I will show that the logic of compression used in social media is also at work in James’s late style. Both Jamesian style and social media are forms of verbal compression that are dense, allusive, and lossless, self-contained programs that can output large quantities of information by referring to a tiny percentage of the original data. And both only work if you know how to read them. Accordingly, the Jamesian narrator’s fundamental task—to arrange and interpret data streams (consciousness, expression, dialogue, action, text)—is the position that needs to be taken up by today’s social media user, who increasingly “knows” friends and family through data streams. James’s sensitivity to the sociopolitics of conversation

is perfectly suited to making digital interlocutors critically aware of the miasma of digital messages surrounding them. Not only social media users, but also defenders of literature too, I argue, can be alerted to the narrative possibilities immanent in social media, thereby moving past skepticism, distaste, or puzzlement at digital culture. By reading James's late style as a structural analogue of digital utterances, we can help students understand their own communicative practices—and help *us* understand *them* as well.

If James's presentation of profound mutual understanding as a result of interplaying messages is surprisingly fresh and relevant in the context of digital enunciation, it is partially due to his attention to the new media of his age. James studies has been increasingly attentive to these new media technologies, both through specific interventions around James's technological awareness, such as Richard Menke's essay on teaching *In the Cage* or Mark Seltzer's "The Postal Unconscious," and through more general accounts like Jonathan Freedman's "Henry James and Early Film" and Stuart Culver's overview of James and New Media in *A Historical Guide to Henry James*. Culver's focus on the telegraph is especially helpful in the present context—the aesthetics of short utterances like those in social media—as his account of *The Portrait of a Lady*'s puzzling opening telegram shows how short utterances represent a distinct aesthetic form. Arguing that Mrs. Touchett's message shows how she has "thoroughly mastered the art of condensation," Culver notes that the telegraph's "obscurities," which emerge as a "by-product of its enforced brevity," are significant because they "anticipate and introduce the interpretive puzzle that comprises the novel's plot" (105). Such moments show why literature scholars should be interested in social media: to borrow Culver's phrase, "an apparent defect becomes ironically an aesthetic resource." Far from automatically commodifying language or foreclosing hermeneutic play, the very limitations of the telegraph—constraints that are reproduced in digital media due to the limits of bandwidths, wifi connections, aspect ratios, screen sizes, processor speeds, and data storage capacities—are the very reasons why James considers telegrams so artistically suggestive. As Jonathan Sterne has written in the context of aural compression, even though many media theorists cannot understand why "in an age of ever-increasing bandwidth and processing power . . . there is also a proliferation in low-definition formats" (4), these media theorists harbor unexamined assumptions about the value of verisimilitude:

Aesthetic pleasure, attention, contemplation, immersion, and high definition . . . have no necessary relationship to one another. . . . [C]ompression practices have created new kinds of aesthetic experiences that come to be pleasurable in themselves for some audiences—from the distortion that is a side effect of electrical amplification in radio, phonography, and instrument amplification, to the imagined intimacy of the phone conversation to the mash-ups that aestheticize the MP3 form and the distribution channels it creates. (5–6)

Sterne notes not only that low-definition experiences often are perceived to have a higher "affective intensity" for audiences (5) but also that low-definition, compressed formats like chromolithography, telegraphy, Morse code, and even book forms like the codex and scroll have aesthetic value specifically because of the low-definition effects of data-compression.

Certainly, most digital enunciations are less than lapidary, dashed off, it appears, with much less labor and care than James's compositions. Though compression as an aesthetic may seem to create trivial, artless banalities, calling the idiomatic "trivial" is less an impartial description than it is itself an act of trivialization. Within James studies, the star of the "trivial" may be rising—consider Greg Zacharias and Pierre Walker's editorial policies for the *Complete Letters of Henry James*. Zacharias and Walker, rejecting Leon Edel's exclusion of "the mere twaddle of graciousness" (HJL 1: xxxii), refuse to distinguish between sacred and disposable writing.<sup>5</sup> Academics who find suggestive what Edel dismissed as "twaddle" are quite close to understanding why social media users tolerate, or seem to bask in, what appears to be trivial. Precisely because the shape and length of conversations are restricted by the affordances of individual devices and programs, social media platforms present users with an imperative to escape the intolerable rigidity of these technological constraints through linguistic experimentation. Digital media force users to devise shortcuts, simplify propositions, and deviate from traditional standards of grammar and etiquette, so we cannot in fairness reduce emerging norms of socially mediated conversation by attributing them to user carelessness or to the commodification of conversations to sell gadgets and apps. Enunciations that might initially strike readers as inelegantly compressed may, upon a second glance, yield their own aesthetic interest and pleasures. In terms of Henry James, digital enunciations often attain the same "rich elliptical abstractionism" we find characteristic of James's style (Hocks 7). If James is right to remind himself that "in art economy is always beauty" (AN 257), then it is possible to discern in digital utterances patterns, strategies, and (occasionally) elegance. Even triviality has form.

In social media and in Henry James's fiction, the form of triviality, I argue, is compression. When we come across social-mediated utterances, they seem merely opaque, monosyllabic sets of pronouns and "to be" verbs, emptied of content, but this is because habitual interlocutors need no contextual aid. Lamentably Henry James has not provided us with a novel's worth of context to enrich the skeletal, orphaned fragments we stumble across like so many tumbleweeds in a digital desert. But James *has* provided us with a prehistory of compression: a genealogy of decryption that, if it may never fully translate tweets and texts, illuminates the relationship between these digital speech acts and the user's larger textual and verbal landscape. *Squeeze, compress, foreshorten, summarize, compact, selected, and concentrated*: these words abound in the notebooks, prefaces, and criticism as an artistic goal, usually in emotionally intense passages marked by longing, triumph, or frustration. Compression holds at bay those Jamesian specters, the "large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary" (AN 84). Distinct from Suzanne Raitt's "rhetoric of efficiency," which links James to a "culture in which efficiency, economy, and the elimination of waste were increasingly heralded as industrial and social ideals" (835) and in which aesthetic efficiency would help "compensate for [Britain's] waning imperial power by increased productivity and the beginnings of a new global ascendancy in industrial output" (849), Jamesian compression transforms this call to reduce textual waste into a narrative logic structuring the novel from within. Not a victim of the literary Taylorism Martha Banta describes in *Taylored Lives*, James instead thematizes both the process of compression and the complementary extraction (decoding) of compressed messages.

This is not to say that Henry James was not interested in reducing word counts; in fact, it was this abiding obsession that makes his compressive logic such a brilliant

routing of editorial (or, if we follow Raitt, ideological) pressures. In "Henry James, In Short," Matthew Rubery has helpfully contextualized James's ambivalent attitude toward brevity in terms of James's distrust of popular journalism's profitable prolixity and of James's "perpetual struggle to keep within the word limits prescribed by editors" (224). Citing James's anxiety to avoid the equally undesirable extremes of "prolixity and brevity, or saying too much and saying too little" (222), Rubery pinpoints Dencombe of "The Middle Years" as a writer who successfully "aimed at a rare compression" (CT 9: 56), thus becoming James's model for keeping within editorial word limits. Rubery notes that it is easy to dismiss any Jamesian pretense to verbal economy. It is also easy to chuckle at Rubery's reminder, "Even a novel as expansive as *The Golden Bowl* first struck James as admirably 'compact'" (224). But this irony interestingly mirrors social media users' attraction to prolixity, for the constraints of social media seem to encourage a greater number of individual messages. The social media user ceaselessly generates textual nuggets, each message by itself intensely restricted. Compensating for brevity with seriality, social media users, like James, can feel that their own texts are "admirably compact" even if they dash off a hundred of them in a day. But it is less easy to laugh at pretensions to brevity when we consider that the difference between a compressed and non-compressed text is less a matter of sheer quantity of words than it is about the interpretive effort it provokes. The preface to *Roderick Hudson* confirms this distance between a "principle of simplification" and a "certain factitious compactness" (AN 15). Rather boldly, this preface claims that "the most interesting question the artist has to consider" is

[t]o 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 . . . [and to keep] clear of becoming vulgar, repudiates the coarse industries that masquerade in its name. This eternal time-question is accordingly . . . always insisting on the *effect* of the great lapse and passage of the "dark backward and abysm," by the terms of truth, and on the effect of compression, of composition and form, by the terms of literary arrangement. It is really a business to terrify all but stout hearts into abject omission and mutilation. . . . (14)

Compressing well not only brings forward the "rich and sharp" but also defends against the "vulgar" and the "coarse." Compressing poorly constitutes "abject omission and mutilation." Little wonder, then, that James's compression imperative has been interpreted by critics as, at best, conflicted. Natasha Sajé has argued that *Roderick's* "moralist" Mary Garland, obsessed by "brevity and meagerness" (RH 253), shows that the novelist "should not allow his moralism to prevent the plastic quality of his art from producing textual pleasure" (Sajé 163).<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Garry Hagberg identifies Dencombe's ability to out-compress his literary rivals as the key to his professional pride.<sup>7</sup> Similar pride animates James as he characterizes "Greville Fane" as "a minor miracle of foreshortening": "the form has to make the anecdotic concession; and yet who shall say that for the right effect of a small harmony the fusion has failed?" (AN 234).

More than gratifying artistic pride, however, compression can provide textual pleasures, as the New York Edition prefaces attest. James may complain that “The Abasement of the Northmores” and “The Tree of Knowledge” required “a greater number of full revolutions of the merciless screw than ‘The Middle Years’” (AN 235), and he may complain that even “The Middle Years” required “the anxious effort of some warden of the insane engaged at a critical moment in making fast a victim’s straitjacket” (232), but he also lushly compares the “squeeze” of a skillfully compressed narrative to “the last squeeze of the golden orange” (252). The “squeeze” of compression is also a seduction, a process of bringing an idea, an experience, an essence, as close as possible—suggesting that successful digital utterances are those that act more like microcosms than like fragments. Similarly, in his preface to *The Aspern Papers*, James describes compression as the technique for imaginatively accessing the Romantic era of Percy Shelley:

This was the beauty that appealed to me; there had been, so to speak, a forward continuity, from the actual man, the divine poet, on; and the curious, the ingenious, the admirable thing would be to throw it backward again, to compress—squeezing it hard!—the connexion that had drawn itself out, and convert so the stretched relation into a value of nearness on our own part. (AN 163)

In this passage, a fully elaborated connection (a “stretched relation”) has far less attraction for James than “squeezing it hard,” an act of compression that entails both intellectual and aesthetic consequences. Clarity is attained as the object is drawn nearer to the meditating mind, and the object takes on a new savor, as when he describes the sweetness of compression as the most vivid memory he has of “The Middle Years.” “[A]fter boilings and reboilings of the contents of my small cauldron, after added pounds of salutary sugar, as numerous as those prescribed in the choicest recipe for the thickest jam,” he recalls, composing “The Middle Years” was “one of the most expensive of its sort in which I had ever engaged” (AN 233). Word limits place James in a straitjacket, but the result is a “rich” sweet syrup, and “how much finer a sweetness” than compression he could not imagine (233). Provoking the author’s “highest infatuation” (234), compression is a demanding seductress for whom “nothing will serve that doesn’t naturally swell and bristle” (242, 233). Compression is a form of delicious, desirable restriction, even a “form of beauty,” for James notes that “to see any form of beauty, for a particular application, proscribed or even questioned, was forthwith to covet that form more than any other” (233). As James internalizes the external calls for discipline, he enacts a dialectical reversal that transforms an antipathy for the terse into a voluptuous, covetous jealousy for the compressed.<sup>8</sup>

In James’s notebooks during the mid-1890s, the compression imperative inspires the experiments in point of view that are regarded as central to James’s literary legacy. While brainstorming “The Real Thing,” James proposes that to “*summarize* intensely and keep down the lateral development” would create “a very short pulse or rhythm” (NB 104). This is the rhythm of the text message, the rhythm of a tweet, a quick, staccato form subject to the same aesthetic standards demanding that “The Real Thing”

should be a little gem of bright, quick, vivid form. I shall get every grain of "action" that the space admits of if I make something, for the artist, hang in the balance—depend on the way he does this particular work. . . . But in how tremendously few words I must do it. This is a lesson—a *magnificent* lesson—if I'm to do a good many. Something as admirably compact and *selected* as Maupassant. (104)

If we continue perusing the notebooks, we find that the "magnificent lesson" is indeed learned. In April 1894, he reflects that the *Yellow Book's* modest word allowance for "The Coxon Fund" "will be sufficient, however, if I get the proper *grasp* of my drama. . . . I want so to squeeze out of it the perfection of a condensed action" (160). A compressed text requires more care, but there are compensations: if successful, he reflects, "what I must get is an *intensification* of the drama." The cramped space fenced in by demanding editors, then, is a challenge to achieve clarity and dramatic tension through the discipline of compression. James's negotiation of word limits in the 1890s also results in stylistic experimentation, just as the similarly cramped space of social media has prompted users to develop an array of new techniques for overcoming bandwidth caps. James muses that if "The Coxon Fund" is to stay under 20,000 words,

I must do it from my own point of view—that of an imagined observer, participator, chronicler. I must picture it, summarize it, impressionize it, in a word—compress and confine it by making it the picture of what I see. . . . [I]f the thing becomes *what I see*—what IS it I see—in the way of action, sequence, story, climax? The subject remains the same, but the great hinge must be more salient perhaps, and the whole thing simplified. A strong subject, a rich subject *summarized*—that is my indispensable formula and memento. (160)

A year later, again contemplating another submission for the *Yellow Book*, he continues to consider the "question of doing something in a very short compass" (200). This unintentionally hilarious entry witnesses James capitulating to the compression principle: he begins by affording "The Next Thing" "3 or 4 cases," then modestly downgrades his allowance to "probably [no] more than 3 cases" (201), and eventually settling on a humble "2 or 3 salient, crucial cases" (202). F. O. Matthiesen's gloss—"This entry furnishes an opportunity of watching James arrive at one of the most distinguishing features of his method, the character of his projected narrator" (203–04)—suggests a foundational relationship between the compression imperative and James's signature stylistic moves. Editorial restrictions on word length were not, in the end, an obnoxious distraction for James so much as a constitutive condition without which "Jamesian style" would have been something very different.

In information theory, compression (also called data compression, algorithmic compression, or source coding) is the technique used in ZIP files, PNG files (compressed images), and MP3s (compressed audio) to reduce the size of a data set (the number of bits, or string of zeroes and ones) to its smallest size while minimizing the amount of data lost in the process. Algorithmic compression identifies patterns and constructs a grammar—a code—that translates each frequently appearing string of bits into a



much shorter string, making it unnecessary to reproduce the entire original string in each of its appearances. Compression thus eliminates redundancy. Its goal is efficiency, finding the minimum string of bits (called the algorithmic information content) necessary to transmit data. I want to argue that algorithmic compression is not only what programmers do: it is the general tendency of all digital communication, which purchases speed through compressing data. The ruthless compression of texting, for example, does not violate rules of spelling or grammar or etiquette, in other words, so much as it encodes *references* to a presumed but tacit grammar shared by sender and receiver. Similarly, the hashtags of Twitter and tagging of Facebook refer to a broader context that does not need to be made explicit. Imagine reading a Wikipedia article and opening every hyperlink it contains; then imagine cutting and pasting all of the linked materials into a new article. This aggregate article would certainly be “complete”—it would inform a reader who knows nothing about the topic—but it would be inefficient for most readers. It would not only make Wikipedia difficult to read but also expensive to maintain and slow to open on a browser.

In compression, then, the smallest files, not the largest, are the most powerful: like a telegram traveling faster than a letter across the Atlantic, the shortest message is received the fastest. *The Ambassadors* illustrates how literally this principle often works in James’s fiction when Strether, upon first seeing Chad Newsome in Paris, is consumed by “a sense of the pertinence of communicating quickly with Woollett—communicating with a quickness with which telegraphy alone would rhyme” (AM 157). His increasing preference for telegraphy over letters stems partly from his guilt at siding with Chad—if “the Atlantic cable now alone” could prevent “the wild weed of delusion” from growing, Strether must ask himself why he cannot risk ambiguity—but it also suggests that telegraphy produces a new and preferable *form* for truth:

his heart always sank when the clouds of explanation gathered. His highest ingenuity was in keeping the sky of life clear of them. Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he held that nothing was ever in fact—for any one else—explained. One went through the vain motions, but it was mostly a waste of life. A personal relation was a relation only so long as people either perfectly understood, or better still, didn’t care if they didn’t. (157)

Explanation—the careful extraction of compressed language, the unwinding of code—is not only misleading but also ineffective. It appears that for Strether, a shared compression algorithm indicates both a shared moral system and an intimate relationship. Miss Gostrey is the one who “perfectly understood,” while it is the expatriates Miss Barrace and Little Bilham who “didn’t care if they didn’t.” It is Mrs. Newsome who requires the “vain motions,” the “waste of life” that is uncompressed data (183). Mrs. Newsome’s moral distance from Strether is thus indissoluble from her refusal to create a new compression algorithm—a problem Strether faces early on when Chad points out the dubiety of a moral high ground based on a lurid presumption of Chad’s sexual entanglement. Mrs. Newsome’s tactlessness is her inability to react quickly to the new code Strether attempts to create with her. “There were echoes of it still in Mrs. Newsome’s letters,” Strether notes of her inability to switch codes, though “it came to him in time to save his manners that she couldn’t at the best become tactful as quickly as he. Her tact had to reckon with the Atlantic Ocean, the General Post-Office and the extravagant curve of the globe.”

Strether is acknowledging that their distance makes compression more, not less, important. The narrator uses this same term—"echo"—to show how compression enables Strether to

treat himself to the statement that would prepare him for the sharpest echo. This echo—as distinct over there in the thin dry air as some shrill "heading" above a column of print—seemed to reach him even as he wrote. "He says there's no woman," he could hear Mrs. Newsome report, in capitals almost of newspaper size, to Mrs. Pocock. (176–77)

As these echoes (repetitions) indicate the successful codification of code, Strether takes such a relish in this vision because it is a fantasy that he can successfully convert Mrs. Newsome and the Pockocks to his new moral vision. Like Jean-Christophe Agnew's account of James's "market metaphors," in which characters' "properties or characteristics" (rather than the characters themselves) "take on a life of their own" (97), and like William Greenslade's account of advertising in *The Ambassadors*, in which "simplifying formulas" are used for "manipulation and power" (106, 100), compression in *The Ambassadors* forms a linguistic politics. Strether's enjoyment of the challenge involved in compressing a message for Mrs. Newsome is therefore a power play:

He was not at this moment absolutely sure that the effect of . . . the crisis wouldn't be to determine some brief missive. "Have at last seen him, but oh dear!"—some temporary relief of that sort seemed to hover before him. It hovered somehow as preparing them all—yet preparing them for what? If he might do so more ominously and cheaply he would tick out in four words: "Awfully old—grey hair." (157)

"Awfully old—grey hair" signifies Chad's cosmopolitan transformation in its form of greatest compression. That it costs him only four words is tied, not coincidentally, to its being the most "ominous" message he can devise. The compressed message is that which not only contains the greatest number of extractable meanings but, interestingly and literally, costs the least.

This inversion, wherein the shortest string contains the most information, and the most impoverished utterance carries the most meaning, appears in James's works precisely at moments of psychological or intellectual intensity. For example, the moment of crisis in *The Outcry* (the Mantovano painting's authenticity, or lack thereof, is about to be confirmed) is couched in a conversation that, taken by itself, appears as repetitive as the fifth or sixth time the same cat meme appears in a Facebook feed:

"I was listening hard—for your knock and your voice."  
 "Then know that, thank God, it's all right!"—Hugh was breathless, jubilant, radiant.  
 "A Mantovano?" she delightedly cried.  
 "A Mantovano!" he proudly gave back.  
 "A Mantovano!"—it even carried Lady Sandgate away.  
 "A Mantovano—a sure thing?" Mr. Bender jumped up from his business, all gaping attention to Hugh. (183)

Assuming that readers have internalized Lady Grace and Hugh Crimble's fears about the painting's authenticity, the very repetition of "A Mantovano!" is what underlines the uniqueness of the art object, what makes the singularity of owning "the last Mantovano in the world" (147) appear as a meaningful truth. This process of affirmation holds true in social media exchanges as well: the more frequently a digital object is forwarded, commented upon, read, liked, or emulated, the greater the aura of truth that surrounds it. In a curious inversion of the Benjaminian aura, each iteration of "A Mantovano!" increases the authenticity of the communicated fact.

As messages that approach the point of greatest compression, "A Mantovano!" and "Awfully grey—old hair" work on the same principles as the new tropes developed by social media users to transcend each platform's limitations. Let us take Twitter, the microblogging platform, as our primary example here. By limiting enunciations to 140 characters, Twitter encourages the rapid development of strategies for transcending this character limit. These strategies include, first, the use of links, using URL shortening programs to avoid eating into the precious 140 character allotment; second, the use of the "@" sign to reference other Twitter users; and third, the use of "hashtags" (#), a categorization tool that identifies the tweet's larger themes and connects it to other tweets on the same topic. As short phrases preceded by the octothorpe, hashtags advise the reader how to interpret the tweet. Tweets become self-translatable: they provide their own encryption keys. When a certain hashtag, like #firstworldproblems, becomes suddenly popular, Twitter notifies users through a real-time list of "trends," thereby universalizing intimate conversations—that is, making a private code public. Twitter has thus become an index of strategies of compression. Whether the tweet is politically relevant or personal and indulgent, as a tweet asymptotically approaches contentlessness, the resultant tendency toward abstraction denotes increasing (not decreasing) sophistication.

The same principle that determines tweets' effectiveness is the same principle that determines the effectiveness of conversations in James's late fiction. In *The Ambassadors*, the longer Strether delays his voyage back to America, and the more time he spends in conversation with Madame de Vionnet and Maria Gostrey, the more succinct *and* nuanced his conversations become. Madame de Vionnet and Strether's *déjeuner* after meeting in Nôtre Dame, for example, constitutes a turning point in their relationship because it is an algorithmic (encoding) session. In this scene, they establish private definitions for "trouble" (280), for "now" (281), "all about me" (282), "sure" (283), "breaking up," and "easy" (284), among other phrases. And, late in the novel, when Strether and Chad speak about Sarah Pocock's confrontation with Strether, as they pass the phrase "found me/you" back and forth (430), they condense in it four connotations: the literal meaning of spatial location, the epistemological event of comprehension, the social attitude of sympathy, and the ethical metaphor of common moral ground. Though this fourfold meaning may resemble classic deconstructive readings of James,<sup>9</sup> my adaptation of compression is closer to Leo Bersani's account of James's late novels as "proposing a language responsive almost exclusively to the inspirations of its own surfaces" (*Future* 146). This surface-work consists of characters choosing to affirm or reject, to echo or let fall into silence, any proposed candidates for compression, for an efficient private vocabulary.<sup>10</sup> Compression, rather than deconstruction, better describes what Jamesian narrators and characters do: consciously erect and manipulate a dynamic but relatively closed system—the system

of their private conversations, which become rule-driven and efficient as interlocutors spend more time speaking and writing to one another. What Jonathan Sterne argues of MP3 files is therefore equally relevant as a descriptor of compressed conversations in James's fiction:

Though we may think of an MP3 as a file, it is also the set of rules governing the process of coding and decoding audio, along with the vast set of processes that at one point or another conform to those rules. . . . [They] require a certain level of self-reference . . . closed enough to operate independently according to the standards set for them, and they can take on creating self-generating, self-adjusting, or self-perpetuating characteristics. (23)

This verbal economy, which establishes a "set of rules" not by reducing the number of total words in a text but by fractally enfolding conversations within one another, is most pronounced in *The Ambassadors* during Strether's conversations with Maria Gostrey. One conversation encodes "plenty of imagination," in which "imagination" encodes the moral and cognitive relativity of inhabiting different points of view (*AM* 447–49). Novel meanings are brought to bear on "plenty," which becomes a customized pronoun, imparting both clarity and richness at a single stroke. Even when they believe Miss Gostrey's interpretive assistance no longer necessary, they continue codifying an algorithm. When she observes, "You've got your momentum and can toddle alone," he repeats, "Yes—I suppose I can toddle" (296). They continue to compress, to program information into certain words even though their relationship is

strangely enough, no longer quite the same; this truth—though not disconcertingly—had come up between them on the renewal of their meetings. It was all contained in what she had then almost immediately said to him; it was represented by the remark she had needed but ten minutes to make. . . . He could toddle alone, and the difference that showed was extraordinary. The turn taken by their talk had promptly confirmed this difference; his larger conference on the score of Mrs. Newsome did the rest; and the time seemed already far off when he had held out his small thirsty cup to the spout of her pail. (303)

The narrator has now taken up "toddle," the word Maria successfully encoded, indicating that compression commands established by characters become links between narrator and reader.

A similar recognition of only-too-successful encoding happens in *The Golden Bowl* between Maggie and Fanny, whose increasingly compressed conversations signal the zenith of their intimacy. Their last conversation marks the overzealous efficiency of successful compression through linguistic absurdities:

Maggie had waited, but only with a question. "Do you think he does?"  
 "Know at least something? Oh about *him* I can't think. He's beyond me," said Fanny Assingham.  
 "Then do you yourself know?"

“How much—?”

“How much.”

“How far—?”

“How far.”

Fanny had appeared to wish to make sure, but there was something she remembered. . . . (542–43)

Traditionally, these dashes would imply an incomplete sentence, but in the logic of compression, the dashes indicate that what is wanted is a tacit affirmation, not a rehearsal, of elided content. Consequently, the repetition of “How much?” and “How far?” does not lead to an answer (or even to a clarification of the referent) but instead to the synonymy of “far” and “much”: a shared principle of algorithmic compression. Paradoxically, the asymptotic dissolution or retreat of any concrete noun or positive *content* is accompanied by an inverse increase in the range of actual *reference*—an increase in the stock of shared knowledge. Fanny’s having “appeared to wish to make sure” covers up not ignorance but certainty, and their collaboration has been too efficient: “awkward” Maggie uses “silence” to “arrest” Fanny, who “falter[s],” “hesitate[s],” and asks,

“And she doesn’t know anything?”

“If she did,” Maggie answered, “Amerigo would.”

“And that’s just it—that he doesn’t?”

“That’s just it,” said the Princess profoundly.

On which Mrs. Assingham reflected. “Then how is Charlotte so held?”

“Just *by* that.”

“By her ignorance?”

“By her ignorance.”

Fanny wondered. “A torment—?”

“A torment,” said Maggie with tears in her eyes.

Her companion a moment watched them. “But the Prince then—?”

“How is *he* held?” Maggie asked.

“How is *he* held?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you that!” And the Princess again broke off. (543)

Fanny has a good reason for dissimulating her perfect knowledge of the situation: Fanny’s compression has drawn to the verbal surface topics Maggie would rather avoid. They realize the limit of their intimacy at precisely the moment when Maggie refuses to program new codes.

As Fanny’s disappointment with Maggie suggests, the problem is not with compression itself but with less successful acts of compression. Compression breaks down when interlocutors fail to extract the message—or even exult in this failure, like the cryptic Facebook status updates that indicate some tragedy in a friend’s life but leave no indication of what happened. In this case, a would-be interpreter must know whether this friend has painstakingly constructed a code, thereby rewarding those who have been internalizing it, and, if not, whether this friend is a sloppy coder or a master manipulator—exactng emotive demonstrations from commenters without proffering the customary payment of lascivious, morbid, or self-incriminating detail.

Deciding requires the power described in "The Art of Fiction" as the very definition of experience: the "power to guess the unseen from the seen," "to judge the whole piece by the pattern" (FN 13). Being a person "upon whom nothing is lost," capable of "catching every air-borne particle" (12) describes not only, say, Fanny, with her careful assemblage of multiple codes or *The Spoils of Poynton's* Fleda Vetch, "a person who could think ten thoughts at once" (SP 121), but also the Facebook user faced with a comment that may or may not be ironic or a texter who must respond to a text filled with missing referents. Thinking "ten thoughts at once" is not just multitasking but finding patterns that locate a digression within the "sunk surface" of a hidden whole.

Because the pattern recognition of compression and extraction works by affirming that each signifier adequately evokes its range of encoded meanings, compression breaks down quickly if an interlocutor forces a new range of meanings on a signifier—as does Strether when he asks if Madame de Vionnet is actively campaigning to keep Chad in Europe:

"But is this lady against your interests at home?" Strether went on.

"Not directly, no doubt; but she's greatly in favor of them here."

"And what—'here'—does she consider them to be?"

"Well, good relations!"

"With herself."

"With herself."

"And what is it that makes them so good? . . . I mean, *how* good are they?"

"Oh awfully good."

Again Strether had faltered, but it was brief. . . . "Excuse me, but I must really—as I began by telling you—know where I am. Is she bad?"

"Bad?"—Chad echoed it, but without a shock. "Is that what's implied—?"

"When relations are good?" Strether felt a little silly, and was even conscious of a foolish laugh, at having imposed on him to have appeared to speak so. What indeed was he talking about? . . . He none the less at last found something. "Is her life without reproach?" (AM 230)

Chad uses "here," "relations," "bad," and "good" as pre-encoded givens, a practice that contrasts with Strether's conscientious determination to re-code the words then and there. Chad's cosmopolitan suavity consists of assuming a shared code, whereas Strether's re-encoding rejects it in favor of the Pococks' puritanical code. What is at stake in this conversation is a compound morality—not only sexual mores but also an ethics of compression. Refusals to compress thus signal profound disagreement, as with Sarah Pocock's "chill" announcement, "I *know* Paris" (337). The phrase is thrice taken up for its compressive potential: first, by Madame de Vionnet's response ("I'm sure you 'know'—but we know perhaps different things" [336]); second, by Strether's reflection (he repeats, "She 'knew Paris,'" [337]); and third, by de Vionnet's interpolation of Strether as *her* partisan ("It's he, I gather, who has learnt to know his Paris" [338]). Moral fights are fought with compression, as both women claim Strether's partisanship by flaunting a private code. However, Strether's confusion, like Chad's cool dismissal of Strether's Pocockian hints, reveal that compression by fiat (by bypassing the coding process) is impossible.

Unsatisfying conversations thus manifest algorithmic discord or conflict. In *The Wings of the Dove*, an early conversation between Milly Theale and Lord Mark, for example, shows compression-by-fiat used against its opposite: disclosure. Their discussion of Milly's position as the coveted guest reveals instead the fraught process of creating that shared translation program:

"Does she know so much about you?"

"No, she just likes us."

Even for this his travelled lordship, seasoned and saturated, had no laugh. "I mean *you* particularly. Has that lady with the charming face, which *is* charming, told her?"

Milly cast about. "Told her what?"

"Everything."

This, with the way he dropped it, again considerably moved her—made her feel for a moment that as a matter of course she was a subject for disclosures. But she quickly found her answer. "Oh as for that you must ask *her*."

"Your clever companion?"

"Mrs. Lowder." (154)

As a sociopolitical tool, compression can develop (or resist) relationships. Lord Mark's refusal to accept Milly's substitution of affection for knowledge ("she just likes us") clashes with her refusal to share the information necessary for assembling a compression algorithm. As a skilled interrogator, Lord Mark gathers translation commands: if "what," then "everything," if "her," then "your clever companion;" if "your clever companion," then "Mrs. Lowder." Even his repetitive transformation of "charming" from adjective to verb—"the charming face, which *is* charming"—teaches Milly how to extract a full range of meanings from a brief utterance. In Milly's resistance to Lord Mark's bid to create a shared algorithm, James uses compression as an index of intimacy.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps unique in James's oeuvre, Milly consistently compresses not in order to disclose and then *embed* disclosed information in subsequent conversations but rather to *evade* disclosure. In the following passage, she uses pronouns and hyperbole for such evasion:

Mrs. Stringham at this flared into sympathy. "Are you in trouble—in pain?"

"Not the least little bit. But I sometimes wonder—!"

"Yes"—she pressed: "wonder what?"

"Well, if I should have much of it."

Mrs. Stringham stared. "Much of what? Not of pain?"

"Of everything. Of everything I have."

Anxiously again, tenderly, our friend cast about. "You 'have' everything; so that when you say 'much' of it—"

"I only mean," the girl broke in, "shall I have it for long? That is if I have got it." . . .

"If you've got an ailment?"

"If I've got everything," Milly laughed. (139)

Mrs. Stringham desperately assembles an algorithmic code by taking up Milly's "have" and "much." Meanwhile, Milly's equation of "ailment" with "everything," a compression by virtue of making each the direct object of the same verbs ("got," "have"), ironically comments on her position as an object of speculation. Whether she's "got" money, pain, or both, whether an interlocutor wants the knowledge for moral (Mrs. Stringham) or literal (Kate Croy) profit, the question, under the verbal conditions of compression, is identical. Consequently, though compression can aid evasion, it is dangerous. In this case, Mrs. Stringham soon demands the pronoun's referent: "We'll go straight to the best near doctor. . . . Tell me, for God's sake, if you're in distress" (139). As Milly discovers, the Jamesian interlocutor generally follows up, and the fuller range of meanings that emerge makes it difficult to suppress an unfortunate truth.

Bracketing the literal through compression is only fair if the referent has been established, as is the case for critics who, as Tamara L. Follini has shown, characterize James's use of brevity, circumlocution, and qualification as a form of sexual repression or denial of personal responsibility (231). I would stress that compression shifts moral responsibility from James (who allegedly fails to disclose) to the reader (who must extract the compressed data), but it is important to determine whether information is being coded or intentionally lost. Put technically, we must know if the compression is lossless or lossy. Lossless compression, by including a shortened version of the data and a table—essentially, a dictionary—retains all of the information in the original data set. Lossless compression, in other words, is "a technique of eliminating redundant data in a transmission with no measurable change to the output" (Sterne 20). By contrast, lossy compression drops some data. Judgment calls are made about what is acceptable to lose, about what kinds of information are more useful than others. Such decisions rely on models of human perception that theorize the boundaries of human perception and thought. As Sterne has argued in relation to the lossy MP3 format, compression "carries within it practical and philosophical understandings of what it means to communicate, what it means to listen or speak, how the mind's ear works, and what it means to make music . . . whole worlds of possible and impossible sound" (2). Though many of these programming decisions today involve the apparently innocuous sacrifice of any data that we do not believe the human senses capable of processing, it is still important to know that decisions are being made about acceptable loss. This conversion is native, not extrinsic, to modernist aesthetic concerns. Virginia Woolf's "Modern Fiction" and Ford Madox Ford's "On Impression" document a radical shift in literary standards of acceptable loss.<sup>12</sup> James's call for reflective thinkers and good writers to be someone "upon whom nothing is lost" (FN 12), then, is a call for reduced lossiness that James shares with the theorists of literary modernism.

In being lossless (or at least asymptotically *approaching* losslessness), James's formal maximalism presumes that no information is lost to a keen observer and that even acceptable compression erodes meaning (thus giving a critical edge to James's constant complaints about exceeding editors' word-length limits). Michel Chion's insight in *Audio-Vision* that approaching fidelity (the goal of lossless compression) often means approaching the hyperreal as much as it approaches verisimilitude (98–99) is interesting here, as it identifies James's lossless compression as a non-realist commitment. Stylistic choices thus reflect assumptions about the generation of the



meaningful utterance—which for James is a process of compression, a code built on a shared history of linguistic interchange. Those diminutive exchanges that pepper the late fiction, when taken out of context, seem as trivial and empty as the average tweet or text. Yet within the novel, they function as a theory of conversation, in which characters build linguistic rapport as they gossip. They create a private grammar that, to the outsider, seems vapid or cryptic, but for those who understand the larger context, are profound precisely in the extreme brevity with which they compress morally and intellectually complex ideas within short, abstract utterances. Extreme compression becomes James's most exalted signifier of mutual understanding, as the deliberate evacuation of concrete nouns into pronouns, of qualifications into unfinished clauses, activates the shared context—activates the algorithmic program that extracts (decompresses) the message.

Specifically regarding sexual repression, the sticking point for Follini's examples, one moment of extraction occurs during Strether's climactic jaunt to the countryside—a trip that is not exclusively traumatic but also lush and sensually seductive. It is no coincidence that “the whole episode” would “remind” him of Maupassant, James's model for compression (*AM* 454). Because “it was all there, in short . . . it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet,” because Strether is “freely walking about in it” without “once overstepp[ing] the oblong gilt frame” (453, 457), the scene is a spatial compression. The scene's fated cohesiveness—“Not a single one of his observations but somehow fell into a place in it; 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”—indicates that he has cognitively and spatially arrived at the point of greatest compression. Strether's reflection, “‘The’ thing was the thing that implied the greatest number of other things” (458), is a manifesto of lossless compression.<sup>13</sup> Only when he arrives at such a definition can he extract the compressed fact of Chad's affair. Tempting though it may be to ridicule Strether's not having faced a fact so long obvious to readers, only in *The Ambassadors's* concluding pages can “the thing” (the affair) mean “the greatest number of other things.”

The unparalleled efficiency of James's compression algorithms, while they quantitatively reduce verbiage, is what allows the aesthetic richness of individual words to reemerge—showing that the ultimate linguistic effect of compression is not loss but aesthetic appreciation. Each time a character repeats, “I see, I see,” the character deprecates the efficient, single “I see,” revealing that the desire to savor language returns when compression succeeds.<sup>14</sup> Just as *The Outcry* draws out layers of meaning in “A Mantovano!” and just as *In the Cage* uses telegrams as provocations for fantasy, compression multiplies, rather than forecloses, hermeneutic opportunities. Compression affirms that reliably affiliating ideas with words is possible, that language is capable of “catching every air-borne particle in its tissue” (*FN* 12). It affirms that a private language, if carefully assembled, can transcend Derridean absence and give a vivid, if temporary, experience of full presence—whose importance to isolated social media users, trying to connect through technologies that seem simultaneously to reduce and to *require* distance from friends and family, is hard to overestimate. Ultimately, then, the skill to collate and critique the linguistic strands of digital interaction is what James offers as a toolbox for negotiating social media. For social media and for James novels, being a good reader requires reconstructing a context that unlocks meaning in utterances that appear to contain no interesting information. Constructing such

a code involves comparing messages across multiple media—work already done for readers by James's narrators but not for social media users.

To help, social media users can become Jamesian narrators, shuttling between the pleasure of absorbed maximalism and the critical charge of compression. Doing so requires a stylistic genealogy that can incorporate James's epiphanic abstractions as well as pithy captions on image macros like cat memes. This is not to say that Scumbag Steve, Condescending Wonka, or the Socially Awkward Penguin contain the same "depth" as a James novel, but it *is* to say that they are equally structured by compression and that they equally achieve conceptual clarity, boast persuasive power, and encourage intimacy. Like Adam Verver, who is, "as a taster of life, economically constructed," whose "one little glass" nevertheless contains "everything he raised to his lips" (*GB* 145), Steve, Wonka, and the Penguin also carry a bottomless "little glass" of scummy behavior, condescension, and social awkwardness, respectively. The lesson James learns from Maupassant—"Let us have fewer nouns, verbs and adjectives of an almost imperceptible sense, and more different phrases variously constructed, ingeniously cast, full of the science of sound and rhythm" (*FN* 208)—can serve as a call-to-arms for social media users. They need to engage in nearly lossless texting or tweeting, in which the dense, self-referential allusiveness of post-postmodern irony culture reaches outward to an intimate and complex code. One fascinating corollary is that James studies becomes self-help: users can find strategies for compression in existing criticism on Jamesian style.<sup>15</sup> Seen through the lens of social media, in other words, scholarship on James's style jumps into a different register of meaning—a register that, for those who might not otherwise engage with it, is astonishingly practical and literal.

James can remind social media users that lossy compression—for example, study aids that appear as substitutes for the whole text assigned in a class—create knowledge only insofar as the user participates in the encryption of a code for the whole text. For those interested in the digital humanities, James's depiction of encoded conversation can serve as a fascinating case study for Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's influential theory of "remediation": the idea that digital culture is characterized by "the representation of one medium in another" (45). And James can remind us not to be cowed by students' digital nativity against our own limited digital engagement. The truth is quite the opposite: our training in textuality and narrativity is precisely the skill set needed by social media users and by any non-users whose brushes with social media leave them confused, nonplussed, or feeling alienated from users. As James cautions in his comments on Maupassant's *Pierre et Jean*, "[h]ard and fast rules, *a priori* restrictions, mere interdictions (you shall not speak of this, you shall not look at that) have surely served their time, and will . . . never strike an energetic talent as anything but arbitrary" (*FN* 223). We too need to assess social media "as we find the case today" instead of deprecating it. By doing so, we can use James to encourage social media users to develop a "healthy, living and growing art, full of curiosity and fond of exercise." Jamesian compression shows us that tweets, texts, and emails are the epiphanies radiating outward from a novel that, though it has not been written, is tacitly available if we apply the lessons about compression learned from James's late style.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>To take a few examples, “The Art of Fiction” ridicules “our Protestant communities” for believing novels “too frivolous to be edifying” (FN 7), and his New York Edition prefaces take very seriously the writer’s obligation to be entertaining and interesting. Even in his equivocal essay on Maupassant, what is more intense than his snark is his admiration of “the singularly vivid concision” and “artful brevity of a master” like Maupassant, who “selects unerringly” with his “hard, short, intelligent gaze” (199).

<sup>2</sup>See Culver, Freedman (“Henry James and Early Film”), Griffin, and Menke for examples of literary critics linking James’s fiction to new media through New Historicist methodology.

<sup>3</sup>See Sterne (1–31) for more information about these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century progenitors of compression.

<sup>4</sup>Championing James’s ambiguity as specifically a mode of complexity is a common feature in Jamesian scholarship. What comes to mind immediately is deconstruction-influenced scholarship (most prominently, Rivkin’s “The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*” and Rowe’s *The Other Henry James*), but even earlier, influential works like Watt’s “The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*” assume that ambiguity is James’s chief stylistic product. Watt’s shrewd observation that James’s tendency toward abstraction conveniently “partakes of our modern preference for multiplicity in method and meaning” (118) is helpful here as it reminds us that scholarly insistence on James’s ambiguity can be historicized.

<sup>5</sup>For more on Zacharias and Walker’s editorials, see Zacharias, who argues that “in a time of student-centered pedagogy and of multiple version texts” it is important to recognize that one reader’s “throwaways” may be “treasures for certain readers” (267).

<sup>6</sup>Sajé’s account of James’s selection process for the New York Edition is quite interesting in terms of compression. Quoting from a letter to William James, she emphasizes James’s contrarian (perhaps anti-Taylorist) rationale in selecting *Roderick Hudson* and *The American* for the New York Edition over *The Europeans*, *Confidence*, and *Washington Square*. Selecting the former, “more spacious, more human, and more sociable” novels deliberately revenges William for “that constant effort at *condensation* (which you used always to drum into my head . . . when I was young and you bullied me) that deprived my former things of these qualities” (HJL 2: 316).

<sup>7</sup>Hagberg’s account potentially identifies an intellectual genealogy for compression that is very different from my own, as Hagberg interprets James’s compression as a philosophical stance in harmony with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s critique of language’s mystifying role in philosophy. In Hagberg’s tidy formulation, James’s “often-stated and always-displayed concern with the literary quality of ‘compression’” serves as the stylistic symptom of his “frequently-unstated but always-displayed suspicion of conceptual generality” (232). Certainly James can be seen as a “moral philosopher in literary clothing” (223)—and Hagberg intriguingly calls attention to Dencombe’s aesthetic crisis as an example of what we might call, following Pippin, “a great moral crash” (77)—but my interest is primarily in linguistic encoding itself rather than its content.

<sup>8</sup>Posnock effects a similar reversal for Strether by painting a portrait of a Strether bent for pleasure and thereby inverting the common critical “rhetoric of sterile negativity that portrays him as vicarious, renunciatory, prissy, fearful, and ascetic” (222). For Posnock, Strether’s “responsiveness converts loss into plenitude” and into a “complex mingling of past and present, concrete and abstract, mystery and reality” (231).

<sup>9</sup>Although the word substitutions and allusions involved in compression may seem to recall the chain of supplements in Rivkin’s “The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*” and Cross’s “story of signifiers” as Strether searches for names (100), compression refers less to the passive intertextuality of *différance* than to the effort of consciously establishing a code, a continuously operating process that ensures clarity and precision. Departing slightly from Cross’s assertion that James “devised a hermetic system of signs” and fails to “contain” the “play of difference” (194), I would emphasize that James devises a story that *dramatizes* both the construction and dissemination of a hermetic system (not its dissolution) as the characters’ private language begins to transform the narration itself.

<sup>10</sup>At the same time, however, I do think that Bersani’s Foucauldian take on such conversations, in which “characters literally make literature by their continuous verbal adjustments to one another’s thrusts of verbal power” (“Subject” 11), underestimates the constructively social and communal potential of discursive exchanges. Bersani’s tendency to read James in a “determinedly unredemptive” light (McWhirter, “Bersani’s” 216) in essays like “The Subject of Power” disregards all other social registers of discursive exchanges in its dogged focus on questions of power.

<sup>11</sup>Jöttkandt similarly links intimacy and language by presenting *The Golden Bowl*’s Maggie as a belated lover whose passion emerges only through mediation. It is only through “her growing consciousness of the possibility of Amerigo and Charlotte’s affair that Maggie truly begins to desire her husband” (178). Maggie’s wily manipulation of this “paradox of desire” hinges on her understanding that “the name is itself the source or ‘cause’ of desire” (187). This talismanic power of utterances is, I think, also behind social media’s allure. For example, it is interesting to note social media truisms—like “Pics or didn’t happen” and “If he hasn’t changed his status, he’s not your boyfriend”—indicate a new way in which language mediates desire.

<sup>12</sup>I am thinking here of Woolf's proclamation that it was no longer acceptable for writers to ignore the "myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel," the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" on the perceiving mind (150). Truly modern novelists must realize that "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon" (154). For Woolf, then, the serialization of James Joyce's *Ulysses* inaugurates a more stringent standard of acceptable loss. Ford Madox Ford's "On Impressionism" can similarly be seen as a salvage mission. The techniques of literary impressionism, which can "render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass—through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you" (41), scrupulously recover the superficially trivial micro-events of consciousness.

<sup>13</sup>My reading of compression is compatible with other readings of this famous scene. We can see compression as what makes possible Bradbury's comparison of this scene to the "'vanishing-point' of a picture [whose] drama is a three-dimensional development, leading towards a pointed but not limiting conclusion" (38). And compression too, I argue is behind the "unity of this semantic space" Steele finds in this passage (128) and behind Lodge's account of the chapter as "allow[ing] the maximum degree of play to the complexity of experience that is compatible with the retention on a logically ordered discourse" (190). Compression is therefore a potential umbrella concept for joining these various critical readings of the scene.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, *The Ambassadors* (281, 298, 300, 365, 368, and 396). An equally long list could be constructed for *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*.

<sup>15</sup>For example, Anesko observes that even if James appears to be "cloaking his intentions in the language of euphemism and deliberate indirection," a change in readerly attention can "school us in the power of art to expose—and express—hidden depths of feeling" (246). And Jöttkand's account of Jamesian desire working through "certain fixed laws that are linguistic in nature" (189) works as sage advice for digital romance.

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