

ANG 6170 : Studies in 19th Century American Literature
Topic for Winter 2012 :

About Aboutness : Henry James and the Hypothetical

What does it mean to say that a text is 'about' something? Observations about textual 'aboutness' are less elementary than they are prefatory: indeed, the long history of critical engagement with complex, canonical literature can be understood as an endless supplement, or as a series of sharp turnabouts inspired by shifting schools of theoretical and writerly practice.

The endlessness of writing about other writing has much to do with that most vexed of English prepositions, 'about.' Consider: if 'about' signifies the theme or focus of something – ie, that X is concerned with Y—it also has the powerful connotation of aimless and circular movement in space, as in 'to wander about' – a locution in which it slides into an adverb. This preposition, then, is at once 'about' the inside of something and 'about' its perimeter, periphery, boundary, general vicinity, or even, at an extreme, its outside. To be about something (as in: this text is about X, I am about to do this, I was just about to do that, I know what I am about, what about X?) is a volatile moment in language. It marks time and it orients (or disorients us) in space. In the case of literary criticism, it is the very condition of our engagement, our pleasure, and our agency as readers. 'Aboutness' is also – and this is an elementary observation – the slipperiness of language itself.

Henry James – like Shakespeare, perhaps – is a particularly fertile terrain for any exploration of the problematic of aboutness. This has partly to do with James's position in literary history: he is the bridge between the certainties of Realism and the obscurities of high Modernism. It also has to do with the long critical heritage on James: James has been a major figure of every school of literary theory, each of which has in turn offered up a new and radically different 'Henry James.' Finally, and most importantly, the complexity of 'aboutness' in James's work is a function of his extraordinarily innovative narrative methods, his detachment of plot from narrative, his complex syntax, his rich figurative language – his 'style,' in short.

To talk about 'aboutness' *at all* is necessarily to hypothesize and to gather evidence in support of one's hypothesis. The central premise of this course is that the critical project of hypothesizing is compounded in its challenges by the *hypothetical turn* in James's late work. That is to say, James's late, great fictions are essentially 'thought experiments' that offer speculative explorations of the limits of our knowledge, the interlinearity of blindness with insight, and ultimately the very (im)possibility of the subject as such.

In this course, we shall read a sequence of James's fictions, concentrating primarily on his work after 1890. Our reading of the fiction will be supplemented by essays both theoretical and critical.

Note : We shall start with a couple of the late short stories : « The Beast in the Jungle » and « The Figure in the Carpet. » *Students are asked to have read these two stories attentively for the first class.*

Corpus :

The Portrait of a Lady. Edited by Robert D. Bamberg. Norton, 2nd edition.

Tales of Henry James. Edited by Christof Wegelin and Henry B. Wonham. Norton, 2nd edition.

The Turn of the Screw. Edited by Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren. Norton, 2nd edition.

The Wings of the Dove. Edited by J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks. Norton, 2nd edition.

NOTE : Students must work with these editions. Much of our class time will be spent doing close reading and analysis, and everybody must be on the same page : there will be *no fussing about* with assorted editions of the texts.

Evaluation :

One formal seminar presentation. (25%)

Contributions to the work of the seminar (25%)

An essay of at least 15 pages (50%)

Note : students are encouraged to experiment with the form and the protocols of 'the critical essay.' Creative approaches are welcomed.