



Dennis Tredy, Annick Duperray and Adrian Harding

Henry James's Europe Heritage and Transfer

Open Book Publishers

14. Some Allusions in the Early Stories

Angus Wrenn

Publisher: Open Book Publishers
Place of publication: Open Book Publishers
Year of publication: 2011
Published on OpenEdition Books: 11 January 2013
Serie: OBP collection
Electronic ISBN: 9781906924386



<http://books.openedition.org>

Electronic reference

WRENN, Angus. 14. *Some Allusions in the Early Stories* In: *Henry James's Europe: Heritage and Transfer* [online]. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011 (generated 08 mai 2019). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/obp/829>>. ISBN: 9781906924386.

14. Some Allusions in the Early Stories

Angus Wrenn

The earliest of James's stories which he was willing to reprint in the New York Edition, "A Passionate Pilgrim," begins not with James's own words but with an allusion to William Shakespeare. By the strict definition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED),¹ where the term is defined as "a covert, implied, or indirect reference," James's title only just qualifies as an allusion rather than a straight quotation, since Shakespeare's *The Passionate Pilgrim* becomes James's "A Passionate Pilgrim." By the standards of the OED many of the examples which will be adduced in this paper constitute direct, overt references and quotations rather than indirect allusions, where the later author makes some form of adaptation to the original wording. However it will also be shown that James himself understood the term in a more general and inclusive sense. In some instances the source of the words imported into James's text is fully acknowledged by James himself. Therefore the field of reference is here widened from pure allusions to something more general, partly because the context in which the words are reproduced is every bit as relevant as the actual words of the quotation, reference, or allusion by themselves.

To use another writer's title as the title for your own is a phenomenon worthy of examining in its own right. William Irwin says that "An allusion may be said to be a reference which is indirect in the sense that it calls for associations that go beyond mere substitution of a referent" (Irwin 521). To call a short story, as here, "A Passionate Pilgrim," referring to the early sequence, chiefly of sonnets, published in Shakespeare's name, has one set of implications. Many readers who have never even read the sequence will

¹ In the OED (1989 348-49), the entry for the verb 'to allude' brings in the etymology from the Latin '*ludus*' and with it the suggestion of the playful.

still know it as one of Shakespeare's works. The use will therefore evoke certain associations even when the reader has no more knowledge than that. Giving a work, as with Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a title derived from a passage in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (Book 17, Ch. 3), in which the phrase lifted is hardly the most memorable in the work, will produce comparable associations only if readers know the whole of the original intimately (Southam 72). Furthermore, the general degree of knowledge among readers changes over time. The phrase, since Eliot adopted it as his title, has an altogether different range of reference from that enjoyed in its original context. Miranda's line "O brave new world" in *The Tempest*, though already of some considerable significance within Shakespeare's play, now arguably brings with it a whole array of other, dystopian associations, essentially thanks to Huxley's novel of that name, which they never had in the original seventeenth century context.² James's "A Passionate Pilgrim" comes close to simply borrowing Shakespeare's title in its entirety without any adaptation to the new circumstances in which it is to be used. By contrast Alan Bennett's *Me, I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is an allusion to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (which is in turn an allusion to the oral children's tale, *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?*, and therefore possibly an allusion without being a literary allusion).

Since the author involved is Shakespeare, perhaps the ultimate canonical figure, "A Passionate Pilgrim" is a title replete with associations, and by 1908 those associations had only multiplied for James. It of course has extra associations when an American writer, the heir, as such, of the Pilgrim Fathers, gives it to his own short story, and all the more so when that story, as here, concerns an expatriate making the pilgrimage in reverse to reclaim his inheritance in the Old World—associations which had not been available to Shakespeare himself. By 1907 the sense that his career had been a pilgrimage had of course only intensified, and by this date James had also made further allusions in his work to that of William Shakespeare. His 1900 short story "The Birthplace" had been concerned with—although it always remains allusive because the bard remains unnamed other than

² Other examples, from the many which might be cited where later authors seize for their titles upon relatively less-known phrases by earlier writers include Steinbeck's quotation of *Mice and Men* (Burns); Huxley's use of Marlowe's *Edward II* for *Antic Hay*; Hardy's use of a phrase from Gray's *Elegy In A Country Churchyard* in *Far From the Maddening Crowd*; and Forster's use of Whitman's 1874 poem on the opening of the Suez Canal (hardly his most quoted) for the title of *A Passage to India*. In each case the later work has surely eclipsed the earlier.

as 'He' (like the deity)—the guardianship of Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon. And by this date James himself knew Sidney Lee, one of the great Shakespeare scholars of his day, who had indeed edited "A Passionate Pilgrim." So what looks like a wholesale borrowing of a title, unadapted, may well be, on closer inspection of the context, highly allusive.³ It was one thing for James to use the title "A Passionate Pilgrim" in 1873, when he was still relatively young and had yet to make the decision to settle permanently in Europe. By 1907 the title becomes an allusion beyond the action of the tale to which it is given, to the history of James's own life as an expatriate.

In 1882 James's short story "The Siege of London" again has a title which possesses allusive qualities, although this time the allusions are not to literature so much as to real life and the history of his own times. For in 1870-1871, the Prussians had laid siege to Paris during the Franco-Prussian War. By the end of that war the attack on Paris became the siege of Montmartre and the Paris Commune by French Government forces. Just a dozen years later, James is using it ironically, in a story whose Parisian inspiration he mentioned on several occasions both in his notebooks and later in the New York Edition Prefaces, here perhaps bathetically, to refer to Mrs. Headway's assault upon polite London society. It may be ventured that this is arguably an allusion in dubious taste. After all, thousands had died, or been reduced to extreme privations in the putting down of the Commune. And the questionable taste of the allusion, as will be shown, is intensified by the fact that the literary references it contains, much more than to London, are to French literature and Parisian society.⁴

Inside the texts of James's fiction the next question to address is not so much identification of the exact words involved in any reference or allusion, and how they may differ from the original, but the context in which the reference or allusion occurs and what its effect may be. Irwin says that allusion can be used "to instruct an audience, to generate an

3 James alludes to Shakespeare repeatedly within the story, echoing *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. On the latter especially, see G. Melchiori's "Locksley Hall Revisited," *Review of English Literature* 6 (October 1965), 9-25. There are, in addition, important allusions to Cervantes, Smollett and Fanny Burney. (See Christina Albers, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Henry James* 1997, 671-72)

4 After all, James's literary inspiration for this short story is Alexandre Dumas *fil's* play *Le Demi-Monde* (1855) (acknowledged in the Prefaces to the New York Edition), where a comparable woman with a dubious past, Madame d'Ange, had 'besieged' polite Parisian society by endeavouring to make an opportunistic marriage.

aesthetic experience in an audience, and to link or connect the author with a tradition by activating themes, motifs, and symbols" (Irwin 521).

It makes a major difference whether the reference or allusion is made by the author (James) in a tale which is told in the third person, or by a character taking part in the story who is also narrating it in the first person, or alternatively by a character in the story who is not, however, the principal consciousness from whose point of view the story is seen. These all constitute different ways of instructing the audience.

James's fiction invariably gains from a frame of reference which includes the writers who formed the staple reading both of the educated British of James's class, and also their counterparts, the same educated classes in New England.⁵ At the same time, Pierre Walker has observed that James reviewed French as frequently as he did English literature (Walker xi). It was at least as much a source of influence upon him. James is not averse to inserting French phrases into his own English prose. As Edwin Fussell has remarked: one can sometimes be forgiven for thinking that a James novel is actually a translation into English from an unknown French original, with a few phrases left in the original language to give local colour (Fussell *The French Side* 141). But in fact the language distinction does have an influence upon his use of the many French novels and short stories which James read from early adolescence onwards. The influence of these French texts upon James often takes forms other than direct lifting of a phrase, but which are arguably every bit as pervasive.

It is worth considering the way in which James himself understood the term "allusion." While the OED talks of "covert, implied, indirect, often passing reference," *Chambers Twenty-First Century Dictionary* describes an allusion as "any indirect reference to something else" and gives a supplementary definition in literary theory of an allusion as "a reference either explicit or veiled, to something else which an author uses deliberately, aware that only readers who are 'in the know' will understand it" (32).

Although this may seem a charter for imprecision James himself appears to have used the term "allusion" in this wide, inclusive way. Littlemore, one of the characters in "The Siege of London," describes the position of power in which he finds himself in relation to Mrs. Headway, who is in fear of being exposed as a woman with a past, which prompts his friend Waterville to refer directly to the Dumas *films* drama written in 1855, *Le Demi-Monde*:

⁵ I am indebted to Philip Horne for sight of his essay "Henry James and the Poetry of Association" [private communication]. For a comprehensive discussion of the phenomenon of allusion, see Gérard Genette 1982, 169-76.

“You’re in the position of Olivier de Jalin, in the *Demi-Monde*,” Waterville remarked. ‘In the *Demi-Monde*?’ Littlemore was not quick at catching literary allusions” (182). Here the narrator—James himself—classifies this direct reference as an allusion.

It has important implications, in James’s narratives, whether the literary reference is made by the narrator—sometimes anonymous, as if it were James himself, or by a character in the story being told. In “The Siege of London” James allows one of the characters to suggest the parallel between the ‘real life’ of the narrative in which they find themselves and fiction, a play which two characters in the plot have both viewed.

In a tale from the previous decade, “The Madonna of the Future,” James introduced the idea of basing the action of his own tale upon some previous work by another author, also French—in this case Honoré de Balzac, perhaps the French novelist whom James revered above all others. Here the story James tells of Theobald—an American expatriate artist in Florence, who passes his entire career, as he himself says, as a “dawdler,” never getting round to painting the ideal portrait of his favoured model, who ends up too aged any longer to serve her purpose—is closely based, although with key differences of emphasis, upon Balzac’s short story “*Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*” of 1832. Balzac’s tale itself purports to be, as it were, historical fiction, with two of its characters real-life seventeenth-century French painters, Nicolas Poussin and François Porbus. Moreover Poussin is not just classical but, coming after the high watermark of the renaissance, a neo-classicist—an artist for whom classical precept is all. The idea of dependence upon the past central to classicism gives it much in common with the process of allusion as practised by James.

Also of significance is the idea that the connexion with Balzac is made not directly by either James (as author) or by his American tourist first-person narrator, but by one of the story’s supporting cast—the society hostess Mrs. Coventry:

“There are people who doubt whether there is any picture to be seen. I fancy, myself, that if one were to get into his studio, one would find something very like the picture in that tale of Balzac’s—a mere mass of incoherent scratches and daubs, a jumble of dead paint!”

(“The Madonna of the Future” 159).

Here, in one sense, is a reference rather than allusion because the writer is mentioned by name; and at the same time it is slightly indirect, since the title of the particular tale by Balzac is not specified by name. Though the

Balzac story "*Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu*" is not identified, it is to prove pivotal in James's tale. The unnamed narrator of the tale within a tale, 'H-', (Henry or an allusion to Honoré?) appears to recognise this particular Balzac story to which Mrs. Coventry is alluding (although James perpetuates the atmosphere of allusion by not spelling this out conclusively) and therefore conceives the idea that Theobald may be destined never to produce any masterpiece at all. And that leads him to confront Theobald with this conviction and therefore precipitate his death. This presumably explains the fact that 'H-' ends feeling "sad and vexed and bitter" and taking his leave of Mrs. Coventry, the ill-willed hostess, "with reprehensible rudeness" (178).

The allusion is also indirect in the sense that it is not made by the first person, the American tourist narrator, 'H-', but by Mrs. Coventry, who is not depicted as a sympathetic character within the tale. We therefore take her allusion to another tale with a certain caution.

And yet allusion does, in another respect, permeate this tale. Theobald, the deluded, dawdling painter, spends his life trying to produce a madonna, one of the archetypal genres of painting in the medieval and renaissance periods. As a genre it is almost by definition allusive. Every new madonna evokes in some respect or other those produced before it. But at the same time, Theobald's projected painting is billed as *The Madonna of the Future*—directed towards some ideal future rather than evoking the past. Yet the very fact that Theobald, as an American Protestant (and by the end of the tale we know that he has been buried in the Protestant cemetery), is painting a madonna is itself culturally incongruous in the nineteenth century. Simultaneously the painting is also an allusion to the debate in artistic circles between naturalism and idealism, a debate with which James would have been familiar from his reading of the French journal *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, which vigorously opposed through the previous decade, the 1860's, the rise of the realist and then naturalist movements, both in painting (Courbet and subsequently Manet) and literature (Flaubert and then the Goncourts, and worst of all Emile Zola). This is echoed in Theobald's justification of his method:

"An idealist, then, I said, half jocosely, wishing to provoke him to further utterance, 'is a gentleman who says to Nature in the person of a beautiful girl, 'Go to, you're all wrong! Your fine is coarse, your bright is dim, your grace is *gaucherie*. This is the way you should have done it! Isn't the chance against him?'"

("The Madonna of the Future" 152).

Theobald goes on to say, pointing at Raphael's *Madonna della Seggiola*, "cease your irreverent mockery! Idealism is *that!*" (152)—to which the narrator 'H-' replies:

"There are many people, I know, who deny that his spotless Madonnas are anything more than pretty blondes of the period, enhanced by the Raphaellesque touch, which they declare is a profane touch. Be that as it may, people's religious and aesthetic needs went hand in hand, and there was, as I may say, a demand for the Blessed Virgin, visible and adorable, which must have given firmness to the artist's hand. I'm afraid there is no demand now" (152-53).

Idealism is essentially allusive, the mere real being transformed so that what is depicted alludes either to some ideal form which has not actually been perceived with the eye or to something remembered from the past. There is no need to allude to something which is actually there in front of our eyes.

James may even, conceivably, be alluding, beyond Raphael's madonnas, for which he is perhaps most famous, to the artist's status as a figure in the renaissance humanist movement, when the narrator describes Theobald looking at his model "bending towards her in a sort of Platonic ecstasy" (161)—Raphael, after all, besides portraying madonnas, also portrayed Plato in his mural *The School of Athens* in the papal apartments in the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

Elsewhere in the same tale we find a wealth of strict allusion. There is the use of a surprising number of Latin phrases such as "*aere perennius*" (174) from Horace's *Third Book of Odes* (108), when Theobald is justifying the lasting value of his "ideal" though as yet unproduced Madonna. Theobald's constant activity never gets anywhere, which is in fact an unending deferral of the creative act, of putting theory into practice, and this is ironically pointed up by another Latin quotation, this time from Pliny the Elder, "*Nulla dies sine linea*" (156). Again we need to take into account the general context in which an allusion is made, and this use of Latin may have an influence on what is probably the most famous line from this otherwise rather under-read tale by James: "Cats and monkeys, — monkeys and cats, — all human life is there!" (180). The earlier quotation from Pliny has prepared us for the Classical context. There is Theobald's response to 'H-' ["thrice happy youth" (149; Ovid, 166)] and now 'H-' goes on to refer to the sculptor of caricature busts as "This jaunty Juvenal" (173), as a nod to the possible classical source of the allusion in Juvenal's tenth satire.

According to Brian Southam in *A Student's Guide To The Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (Southam 48-52), Eliot, in "Burbank With A Baedeker: Bleistein With A Cigar," appears to be alluding first to "The Aspern Papers" and then "The Madonna of the Future," yet may in fact have been influenced not by the original James texts (though doubtless he had also read these) but by a conflated "pastiche quotation" put together by Ford Madox Ford in his Henry James monograph of 1913, where Ford twice repeats the "cats and monkeys" line. Southam surmises that Eliot may be alluding simultaneously to "The Madonna of the Future" and to the line "goats and monkeys" used by Othello in Act IV Scene III of Shakespeare's play, which, like James's *The Aspern Papers*, is also initially set in Venice.

In *Daisy Miller* of 1878, it is another literary reference sown by another ill-willed hostess in polite society, this time Mrs. Costello, which, as in "The Madonna of the Future," points forward to the central character's demise. Here the American, and more precisely Bostonian, expatriate Mrs. Costello makes a reference to a novel in French which was to become obscure even within the last years of the nineteenth century.

Writing from Rome to her nephew Winterbourne, the anti-hero of the tale, Daisy's fair-weather, stand-offish admirer, Mrs. Costello remarks:

'Those people you were so devoted to last summer at Vevey have turned up here, courier and all,' she wrote. 'They seem to have made several acquaintances, but the courier continues to be the most *intime*. The young lady, however, is also very intimate with some third-rate Italians, with whom she rackets about in a way that makes much talk. Bring me that pretty novel of Cherbuliez's—*Paule Méré*—and don't come any later than the 23rd' (332).

This reference goes, as it were, a stage further than that to Balzac in "The Madonna of the Future." There it was left to a secondary character, by whose veracity and perspicacity the reader does not set any great store. Here it is not only a secondary character, but one who is outright ill-disposed towards the heroine of the novel. The mention of *Paule Méré* is every bit as poker-faced or inscrutable as James had been when borrowing the title of Shakespeare's sequence as title for "A Passionate Pilgrim." No more clues than the title are given, except that Mrs. Costello regards the novel as "pretty." Of course there is a quantum difference between Shakespeare and Victor Cherbuliez, but James, in 1879, here expects the reader to pick up on the Cherbuliez *Paule Méré* reference with no more help than we were given to make the connexions with Shakespeare in "A Passionate Pilgrim."

Yet the implications of Mrs. Costello, arguably the *bête noire* who initiates the ostracisation of Daisy Miller, making this reference, rather than James doing it directly as narrator of the tale, are significant. And a detailed knowledge of Cherbuliez's novel *is* required.⁶ Although it is written in French, it differs in a vital respect from almost all the other French authors James was reading. For Cherbuliez was not French by birth but a Swiss from Geneva and moreover a Protestant, indeed a Calvinist. He was simultaneously, as a French speaker, a member of the European cultural order to which James in so many ways aspired throughout his career, and yet also someone who had come from a Protestant background broadly comparable to the culture James had left behind in New England. *Paule Méré*, one of Cherbuliez's early novels, tells the story of a young free-spirited woman, who is ostracised by the repressive Calvinist Swiss community in which she has been brought up, and ends her days fleeing to Italy and dying prematurely, of a broken heart. (Another Protestant admirer, albeit Swiss rather than American, proves himself fickle in his loyalty).

Given these parallels it is surely incongruous in the extreme for Mrs. Costello, who is to remain inimical and unforgiving to Daisy to the end, to, as it were, incriminate herself by making this literary reference to Cherbuliez's novel.

A parallel for what Mrs. Costello is here doing may be found in Shakespeare. In Act I Scene II of *Hamlet*, Claudius, attempting to dissuade Hamlet from excessive grieving for his recently deceased father, says:

Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father,
But you must know your father lost a father,
That father lost, lost his—and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow. But to persevere
In obstinate condolment is a course
Of impious stubbornness,... Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried
From the first corse till he that died today,
'This must be so' (185).

⁶ See Pierre Walker 1995, 5-17; Edward Stone 1964, 88-93; and Viola Dunbar 1948, 184-86.

Claudius, having murdered his brother, attempting by rational argument to coax Hamlet out of excessive mourning, ends by alluding to the story of the first murder, and not just a murder but a fratricide, the murder by Cain of Abel, "the first corse." The last thing which he should have mentioned he ends up divulging. Of course that makes nonsense of what may be called realism in literature. It has to be assumed that Claudius, the plausible human being, is sacrificed here by Shakespeare for the sake of incriminating him in the eyes of the audience. In the seventeenth century (or the nineteenth, for that matter) the readership or audience could be relied on to pick up the biblical reference from Genesis. Or, alternatively, it might be argued that Shakespeare is here giving us not the realism of the conscious world but rather the psychological realism of Freud, according to whom we reveal our most essential truths despite our conscious selves, by saying the very last thing which should come into our heads.

The difference between the Hamlet "Cain" passage and the *Daisy Miller* extract is that the former is an allusion according to the strict definition—an indirect reference—whereas the mention of Cherbuliez is an explicit reference, if only to the title. The first is to the most common work of literature of all—the Bible—whereas the second is to a far from canonical text. But in each case the character is made by the author to incriminate himself or herself.

Today the position is complicated still further. Mrs. Costello makes a reference which is entirely lost on all of us except those who have gone to the lengths of tracking down Cherbuliez's novel in a research library. But even back in the 1870's it was never a reference which in her capacity as a plausible character, in a realistic rather than fantastical or allegorical novel, she should surely have been making in the first place. What she is doing is the equivalent of Brecht's characters remaining on stage even when they are no longer involved in the action—a sort of *Verfremdungseffekt*; or of the character Mrs. Drudge in Stoppard's parodic *The Real Inspector Hound*, who answers the telephone at the beginning of Act I and then proceeds to give, quite uncalled for by the situation, a whole range of background information which is of no use to the person supposedly on the other end of the line (in the supposedly real situation) but of every help to the audience in the auditorium, at this point still in the dark;⁷ or to give an

⁷ "(The phone rings. Mrs. Drudge seems to have been waiting for it to do so and for the last few seconds has been dusting it with an intense concentration. She snatches it up.)

MRS DRUDGE (into phone): Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon's country residence one morning, in early spring?... Hello! – the draw – who? Who did

equivalent from James's own time, Ibsen's maids conveniently filling us in on Rosmersholm's past before he makes his entry (Act I Scene I). Ironically, it is precisely because the other work referred to has now become wholly obscure, both in this case, and in the Dumas *films* reference in "The Siege of London," that what was an explicit reference has arguably become more indirect and veiled than a formal allusion. I quote here (declining to allude) Christopher Ricks in *Allusion and the Poets*, who in turn cites Eliot on the practice of "difficult" allusions in a letter of 1931 to I.A. Richards:

That, as you know, is a theory of mine, that very often it is possible to increase the effect for the reader by letting him know a reference or a meaning but if the reader knew more the poetic effect would actually be diminished; that if the reader knows too much about the crude material in the author's mind, his own reaction may tend to become, at best, merely a kind of feeble image of the author's feelings, whereas a good poet should have a potentiality of evoking feelings and associations in the reader of which the author is wholly ignorant

(Eliot, quoted by Ricks 5).

you wish to speak to? I'm afraid there is no one of that name here, this is all very mysterious and I'm sure it's leading up to something. I hope nothing is amiss for we, that is Lady Muldoon and her houseguests are here cut off from the world, including Magnus, her ladyship's husband Lord Albert Muldoon who ten years ago went out for a walk on the cliffs and was never seen again—and all alone, for they had no children" (Act I Scene I, 15).