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Reading Henry James Atmospherically: The case of *The American Scene*

Henry Carmines

Introduction: Atmosphere, Ambiance: Towards A New Ontology of Literature

Thinking in terms of atmosphere has emerged over the course of the past decade as a productive mode of approaching literary texts which may allow us to bypass the thorny issue of the possibility for a text to represent an extra-linguistic reality. This new paradigm has generated a wealth of literary scholarship including Anna Jones Abramson's 2016 thesis *The Age of Atmosphere: Air, Affect, and Technology in Modernist Literature*, Jesse Oak Taylor's *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016), Thomas H. Ford's *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air* (2018), and Dora Zhang's *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (2020).

Contemporary interest in atmosphere as an ontological category has emerged out of the "New Phenomenology" of German philosopher Hermann Schmitz. Schmitz opposes what he calls the current reigning "psychologistic-reductionist-introjectionist paradigm," the beginning of which he dates to the mid-5th century B.C. Under this ontological paradigm, existence is divided into an immaterial soul and a material world accessible to the soul through the empirical data provided by the five senses. One of the consequences of this paradigm is that phenomena such as emotions, which are difficult to categorize, are relegated to the private theater of the psyche, rather than being understood as dynamic, external "atmospheres" as Schmitz argues they had been understood prior to this paradigm shift: "For the ancients, rage, *eros* and parrhesia—for instance—were not private inner emotions but atmospheres, partially personified respectively by Ares, Aphrodite and the Holy Ghost" (Griffero 23). Schmitz's "New Phenomenology" instead, according to Tonino Griffero: "frees emotions and feelings from their introjection into the soul and considers them as felt-bodily moving forces that are spatially poured out into a lived, pre-dimensional, pre-geometrical and surfaceless space (like that of sound, of weather, of posture, etc.)" (Griffero 22).

Following the line of thought opened by Hermann Schmitz, Gernot Böhme provides examples of similar atmospheric phenomena, showing how our language allows us to give quite determinate characterizations of these phenomena:

one speaks of the serene atmosphere of a spring morning or the homely atmosphere of a garden. On entering a room one can feel oneself enveloped by a friendly atmosphere or caught up in a tense atmosphere. We can say of a person that s/he radiates an atmosphere which implies respect, of a man or a woman that an erotic atmosphere surrounds them. [...] atmosphere indicates something that is in a certain

sense indeterminate, diffuse but precisely not indeterminate in relation to its character. (Böhme 113-114)

Though we can easily characterize atmospheres, there is still something indeterminate about the way we understand their supposed existence. “Atmospheres are indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status,” Böhme goes on to claim: “We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze” (Böhme 114).

Unsatisfied with what he perceives to be a lack of precision in previous ways of evoking the ontological status of atmosphere, Bruce Bégout sets out in *Le concept d'ambiance* (2020) to develop a language and a method that might allow us to better describe this phenomenon noted by Schmitz and Böhme. Bégout prefers the term “ambiance,” finding that it highlights the “affective primordially” of the phenomenon over the mere “sensorial and perceptive dimension” evoked by “atmosphere” (Bégout 17). In order to sidestep the traditional Western metaphysical picture limited to an ontology of substances, properties, and relations, Bégout proposes the method of “eco-phenomenology” which requires that we attend to the primordially of immersion within a “milieu” as a prior condition to any subsequent reference to the ontology categories of substance, property, or relation. The ambiance would not be something that we come into contact with as if it were a sort of ontological object revealed to us through the evidence of perceptual sense data. What Bégout proposes instead is a fundamental change in the way we take account of any phenomena at all, since:

all experience is first of all that of this pre-given situation in which we are immersed. It is not the frontal relation between the *I* and the *world* that matters here. It is above all this present situation as the primary and encompassing experience in which something like a subject-object relation can subsequently take place.¹ (Bégout 39)

Instead of “atmosphere” as something we encounter on walking into a room or in being overtaken by emotion, “ambiance” is a phenomenon which we can always potentially be attuned to, which “expresses the presence of the sensible milieu”² at all times underlying experience (Bégout 39).

If we accept that there is a prior level of situational ambiance before the formation of any subject-object relation, we may now be able to see beyond the question of a literary text’s

¹ All translations from French are my own: « ...toute expérience est d’abord celle de cette situation prédonnée dans laquelle nous sommes plongés. Ce n’est pas la relation frontale du moi et du monde qui importe ici. C’est avant tout cette situation présente comme expérience première et englobante dans laquelle quelque chose comme une relation sujet-objet peut ensuite avoir lieu. »

² « exprime la présence du milieu sensible »

reference or lack thereof to something outside of itself. This is the problem that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht proposes to resolve through what he calls “reading for Stimmung.” The German word “Stimmung,” Gumbrecht explains, carries a rich set of connotations that cannot be captured in English translation. Both “mood” and “climate” are proposed as translations, illustrating the way “Stimmung” traverses the distinction between “inner” and “outer”: “‘Mood’ stands for an inner feeling so private it cannot be precisely circumscribed. ‘Climate,’ on the other hand, refers to something objective that surrounds people and exercises a physical influence” (Gumbrecht 4).

Though it lacks the ontological precision later provided by Bégout’s “ambiance,” Gumbrecht’s account of “Stimmung” gestures towards a similar phenomenon, which he also describes as “tone” or “atmosphere.” Gumbrecht’s method of “reading for Stimmung” evades “the paradigm of representation” (Gumbrecht 5) in the same way that Bégout’s ontology of ambiance evades the traditional metaphysical subject-object relation. This, Gumbrecht argues, diverts our attention away from trying to interpret or decode meanings that a text might contain and allows for “reclaiming vitality and aesthetic immediacy that have [...] gone missing” in much recent literary scholarship (Gumbrecht 12).

When we read for atmosphere, or immerse ourselves in the ambiance of a text, we no longer search for meanings, interpretations, or truths, as if they could be detached and presented as separate from the experience of reading the text. Focusing on the atmosphere or ambiance in which our experience of reading takes place allows us to take the literary text as “part of life in the present” (Gumbrecht 18).

Atmosphere in the Work of Henry James

Henry James’s sensibility to minute atmospheric phenomena has often been noted. David Lapoujade for instance, in a study which compares the work of James to the pragmatist philosophy of his older brother William, notes that, “James’s characters are not only reflectors,³ but resonators. The resonator allows for the perception of the tonalities that resonate in voices, but also in places, things or atmospheres, an entire art of *Stimmung*”⁴ (Lapoujade 52).

³ The term “reflector” is one coined by James in the prefaces to the New York Edition of his work in order to describe in part what Gérard Genette would later call “focalisation” (Genette 194-200). Though similar on the surface, the Jamesian figure of the “reflector” has far more complicated implications than Genette’s “focalisation.” To go into this, however, would lead to issues beyond the scope of the present article. The critic who has gone the farthest to my knowledge in coming to terms with the Jamesian figure of the “reflector” is Sheila Teahan in *The Rhetorical Logic of Henry James* (1995).

⁴ « Les personnages de James ne sont pas seulement des réflecteurs, mais des *résonateurs*. Le résonateur est celui qui fait entendre les tonalités qui résonnent dans les voix, mais aussi dans les lieux, les choses ou les atmosphères, tout un art des *Stimmung*. »

This heightened sensibility to the tonalities of places, things, and atmospheres seems to find increased expression in the later period of James's work following an unsuccessful period of writing for the theater, which ultimately led James back to the novel, bringing with him the lessons of theatrical representation. The lessons learned from James's period writing for the theater are most evidently on display in *The Other House* and *The Awkward Age*, which are almost entirely composed of dialogue and a bare minimum of description resembling stage direction. James's evolving technique during this period is well documented by Walter Isle, who writes that these experimental novels "are conceived as plays, as extended dialogues, and the whole situation rather than the consciousness and perceptions of one character assumes central importance" (Isle 10). David Kurnick, following along these same lines, argues that James's transposition of the scenic situation to the novel results in a turn away from an interest in inner psychological depths; instead, the characters of *The Awkward Age* seem to "tune their attention to the 'vibrations' the scene produces among them" (Kurnick 133). Isle and Kurnick's conclusions would seem to point away from a traditional story of James's work as the culmination of fiction's long but steady turn to the examination of the subjective interior. In light of recent theorizations of "atmosphere" or "ambiance," we might begin to attend to James's writing, especially that produced after 1895, as a direction of attention to these phenomena which evade capture by a traditional metaphysical subject-object division of the world. Focus on the scenic situation, "the Occasion as a thing in itself, really and completely a scenic thing," as James writes in the preface to *The Awkward Age*, becomes an increasing concern from this point on in his work. (James, *The Art of the Novel* 110).

The present article will be limited to engaging with atmosphere in a small selection of passages from James's 1907 collection of travel writings *The American Scene*. There remains a large field of unexplored possibilities for articulating modes of atmospheric reading in the experimental novels of the 1890s, the three great novels of James's "major phase" (*The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*), or elsewhere in James's vast body of work. As it concerns the three novels of the "major phase," steps forward in this direction can be found in Chunlin Men's "The Form of Affect in *The Ambassadors*" (2020) and Dora Zhang's chapter "James's Airs" in *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (2020).

As we now prepare to read *The American Scene* we might already begin to hear an overtone in the title which resonates with James's ongoing concern with "the scenic thing" as opposed to any depiction of an objective world or even subjective consciousness. The question of how to write about his native country had been a career-long dilemma for James. His most well-known expression of this difficulty is found in his long biographical essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1879, in which he lists "the items of high civilization [...] which are

absent from the texture of American life,” and which are taken to be necessary material for a novelist (James, *Hawthorne* 352). Somehow, Hawthorne is able to exercise the art of the novelist despite the absence of this material, producing works of art which are “pervaded with that vague hum, the indefinable echo, of the whole multitudinous life of man” (417). Rather than taking the raw material of the “items of high civilization” as the subject of his writing, Hawthorne’s success as an American writer came from “the *indirect* testimony of his tone, his accent, his temper, of his very omissions and suppressions” (James, *Hawthorne* 412). What James says about America in *The American Scene* is not to be found in any explicitly formulated judgements or critiques that he at times seem to be making, but rather in this same “*indirect* testimony of his tone, his accent, his temper.” These writings offer an ideal window into James’s attention to atmosphere, as he has at this point developed an acute ability to sense and a highly developed technique for writing what he sometimes calls the “tone,” “accent,” or “note” of the various places he visits. This quality is found neither in an external material reality nor within a subjective interior which responds to an outside world, but in a textual atmosphere or ambiance to which we become attuned in the process of reading.

As my reading of two passages from *The American Scene* will suggest, the late Jamesian style in this work encourages this mode of reading as attunement to atmosphere. In the first passage from the section “New York Revisited,” the text stages a dissolution of the subject position, drawing the reader out to the limits of the individual point of view and gesturing towards an atmospheric medium which underlies experience. In the second passage from the section “Baltimore,” the reader must become attuned to ambient tonal manifestations rather than reconstruct descriptions of any particular items of experience. What results is not so much a representation of James’s own experience in Baltimore as an intensity of expression with the ability to stimulate vivid experience in the life of the reader.

“New York Revisited”: Dissolving the “centre of consciousness” into the atmosphere

As the narrative voice of *The American Scene* recounts his travels throughout the country, he is always concerned with discovering a “mystic meaning” that each place may have “to give out”:

To be at all critically, or as we have been fond of calling it, analytically minded—over and beyond an inherent love of the general many-coloured picture of things—is to be subject to the superstition that objects and places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves to give out: to give out that is to the participant at once so interested and so detached as to be moved to a report of the matter. (James, *The American Scene* 579)

This “mystic meaning” is not to be thought of as an inherent property of a place, but it is necessarily something that must be given to a “participant.” In order to make his report, “[t]hat perverse person is obliged to take it for a working theory that the essence of almost any settled aspect of anything may be extracted by chemistry of criticism, and may give us its right name, its formula, for convenient use” (579). It is here that the analyst runs into problems, for when confronted with the immensity and incoherence of the impressions of American life, the search for a “mystic meaning” that he superstitiously believes must be there gives way to “sighing [...] that the cluster of appearances can *have* no sense” (579). At this point, the only way to complete his “report” is “quite consciously, to go to pieces” (579). The unified conscious self that sought “mystic meaning” must begin to disassemble, to dissolve into something no longer constrained by the limits of the subjective “centre of consciousness”⁵: “The last thing decently permitted him is to recognize incoherence—to recognize it, that is, as baffling; though he may present and portray it, in all richness, for incoherence” (579). He cannot “recognize incoherence,” that is to say to consciously perceive incoherence, an act which would necessitate a prior unified conscious self. The “incoherence” is so bewildering to the conscious mind that reflective consciousness no longer serves as a means of representation. Though the possibility that one might “present and portray it [...] *for* incoherence” remains available.

The opening pages of the section “New York Revisited” present an example of the baffled consciousness unable to recognize any “mystic meaning,” resorting instead to proliferations of figural language which do not assemble into a coherent whole. At first, the narrator appears to be able to coherently apprehend “the whole picture” as he views the vast expanse of the New York Harbor from the distance of his floating barge.

Something of the air of the occasion and of the mood of the moment caused the whole picture to speak with its largest suggestion; which suggestion is irresistible when once it is sounded clear. It is all, absolutely, an expression of things lately and currently done, done on a large impersonal stage and on the basis of inordinate gain—it is not an expression of any other matters whatever. (417)

This unified story suggested by “the whole picture” will be immediately put into question by the next clause of the sentence which begins with “and yet”:

and yet the sense of the scene (which had at several previous junctures, as well, put forth to my imagination its power) was commanding and thrilling, was in certain lights almost charming. So it befell, exactly, that an element of mystery and wonder entered into the impression—the interest of trying to make out, in the absence of features of the sort usually supposed indispensable, the reason of the beauty and the joy. It is indubitably a “great” bay, a great harbour, but no one item of the romantic, or even of the picturesque, as commonly understood, contributes to its effect. (417)

⁵ The “centre of consciousness” is another term coined by James in the prefaces to the New York Edition of his work to figure what Gérard Genette would later term “focalisation.”

There appears to be something more to New York than this initial story that was suggested by “the whole picture.” An unexplainable “sense of the scene” forces itself upon the conscious observer which baffles his ability to construe any “reason” as to how this “prosaically peopled” place with “not a grace to exhibit” (417) could possibly induce such a “commanding and thrilling” sense. The question becomes then from where this “sense of the scene” arises. Is it the case, as the narrator further muses, that “the imaginative response to the conditions here presented may just happen to proceed from the intellectual extravagance of the given observer” (417)? The word “extravagance” suggests etymologically a wandering outside of boundaries. Can it be that the intensity of the “scene” to which the observer is exposed causes the intellect to wander outside of its usual, subjective limits? The following lines seem to indicate this possibility: “When this personage is open to corruption by almost any large view of an intensity of life, his vibrations tend to become a matter difficult even for *him* to explain. He may have to confess that the group of evident facts fails to account by itself for the complacency of his appreciation” (417).

The suggestion that “this person is open to corruption” by the vast sprawling scene before him is a sign of an exposure of the subject to that which is outside. His response, “his vibrations,” could not then be entirely an internal, subjective affair given this opening out onto an outside, suggesting a porosity of subjective boundaries. The “vibrations” in question are beyond the scope of the intellect and cannot be accounted for from the subjective viewpoint, as is indicated by the emphasis placed on the pronoun “him” in the phrase “difficult even for *him* to explain.” Perhaps this explains the narrative voice’s need to create a character, “the given observer [...] this personage,” in order to then make external commentary, delineating the intellectual limits of the character. Not only are the limits to the subjective viewpoint brought to light, but “the group of evident facts” is similarly limited in its ability to “account by itself” for the observer’s felt “vibrations.” The aesthetic response to the scene, the observer’s “vibrations,” do not appear accounted for either by an inward subjective response or by the facts themselves with which the observer is confronted. In the next line, the narrative voice returns to the subjective “I” pronoun, now with a modified stance as to its original perception of “the whole picture”: “Therefore it is that I find myself rather backward with a perceived sanction, of an at all proportionate kind, for the fine exhilaration with which, in this free wayfaring relation to them, the wide waters of New York inspire me” (417).

Having conceived of an additional perspective in addition to that of the subjective “I” perspective, the narrative voice now feels “a perceived sanction” as to its own “free wayfaring relation” to the “wide waters of New York.” At this point an alliterated /w/ sound begins to intrude onto the narrator’s efforts to give a coherent account of his experience, as if a rushing

wind is blowing through to disperse any intentional structure of meaning. This dispersal can be noted in the next line as the controlling hypotactic structure begins to break down. The next sentence begins simply with “There is...” followed by a series of loosely connected images: “There is the beauty of light and air, the great scale of space, and, seen far away to the west, the open gates of the Hudson, majestic in their degree, even at a distance, and announcing still nobler things” (417-418). As the coordinates of the unitary subject are pushed to their limits, focus turns to the vague atmospheric mediums of “light,” “air,” and “space,” which envelop all experience, providing it with a tonality which perhaps precedes any subjective “wayfaring relation” to discernible objects. The figure of the threshold, here in the form of “the open gates of the Hudson,” is a recurring figure throughout James’s travel writings which suggests the possibility of an undiscovered unfamiliarity, lurking just beyond one’s point of view. If the literary text is perhaps unable to fully extract us from our particular point of view, it can nonetheless draw us out *towards* such a possibility. It is as if there is an always unnamable imperceptible something *else* just beyond the horizon, figured here as the distant blurred “open gates” which bear the promise of “still nobler things” that are not *yet* perceptible.

Just after this passage suggesting the possibility of phenomena beyond the limits of our present vision, the narrator claims that “the real appeal,” presumably an “appeal” which surpasses the limits of an individual point of view, is “the appeal of a particular type of dauntless power” which is “indescribable” (418). Though it cannot be described directly as an item on its own, the “dauntless power” manifests itself through the “objects and elements” to which it “impart[s] [...] something of its sharp free accent” (418). What follows is another instance of the breaking down of hypotaxis into a disjointed series of images, sounds, and free-floating present participles: “imparting to every object and element, to the motion and expression of every floating, hurrying, panting thing, to the throb of ferries and tugs, to the splash of waves and the play of winds, and the glint of lights and the shrill of whistles and the quality and authority of breeze-borne cries” (418).

Whereas the narrator’s initial encounter with New York had been that of the unified vision of “the whole picture,” here the text gestures out beyond the visual, reveling in a vibrating medium of onomatopoeic sound with such words as “panting,” “throb,” “splash,” and “shrill.” The subjective perspective, already weakened and pushed to its limits by the narrative voice’s rhetorical strategies, is now invaded by the ambient environment which no longer recognizes subjective boundaries and projects itself freely into the text, taking the form of a sonorous excess. The “dauntless power” that overtakes the subjective perspective seems best discerned in terms of its “accent,” which is felt in this passage in terms of a focus on the sonorous dimension of experience. In the next section I will explore more in depth the nature of this “dauntless power,” which I claim can be thought through the notion of “atmosphere,” which

emerges as an alternative to the perspective of subjective consciousness throughout *The American Scene*.

“Baltimore”: Immersion in the atmospheric medium

In a letter to his friend Howard Sturgis during his travels in America, James writes: “I have been in constant movement and almost *never* my own master for an hour” (James, *Letters*, Vol. IV 325). Constant motion implies a constantly shifting set of experiences, leaving no possibility for the fixed immediacy of a reflective image. Before any one place has the time to settle into a substantial object with properties to be listed, which is our habitual mode of apprehending objects in the world, the motion of the traveler promotes a different mode of apprehension, by which one’s “sensibility” might become gradually attuned to a place.

As the narrator of *The American Scene* travels south, the possibility of attunement to an atmosphere opens up as gradual changes display themselves through the train car window. Despite the narrator’s preconceived idea of arriving at a clear delimiting sign of some kind of “loose and overreaching citronic belt” (James, *The American Scene* 605) which would announce his arrival in the “South,” he finds that changes are so slight from any one place to the next that one cannot rely on such large symbolic generalizations. Arriving in Baltimore, where neither the symbolic values of “North” or “South” are able to assert their hold over one’s perception of the landscape, the narrator goes to wander throughout the city without any preconceived notions of what he may find. What he finds in the streets of Baltimore is an “impression of felicity,” though there are no particular features to point to that could be ascribed as the cause behind such an impression: “Character is founded on elements and features, so many particular parts which conduce to an expression. So I walked about the dear little city looking for the particular parts—all with the singular effect of rather failing to find them and with my impression of felicity at the same time persistently growing” (607).

As the narrator persists in looking for “items and objects, signs and tokens” that could be described and decoded as the mystery behind the sense of place that the environment gives out in the form of an “impression of felicity,” this impression continues to produce itself, independently of any apparent decodable signs: “while I mechanically so argued my impression was fixing itself by a wild logic of its own” (607). Here James is engaged not in hermeneutic deciphering, but in what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls “reading for Stimmung”:

Reading for Stimmung cannot mean “deciphering” atmospheres and moods, for they have no fixed signification. Equally little does reading for Stimmungen mean reconstructing or analyzing their historical or cultural genesis. Instead, it means discovering sources of energy in artifacts and giving oneself over to them affectively and bodily—yielding to them and gesturing toward them. (Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* 18)

The “impression of felicity” produced by the streets of Baltimore does not appear to be the result of any arrangement of signs, but is a more subtle appeal to what James calls “sensibility”: “if one but had sensibility, the ciphering could be neglected and in fact almost contemned” (James, *The American Scene* 607). This mode of apprehension through “sensibility” is contrasted with the mode practiced by the journalist, who requires “items” in order to position himself and give meaning to his surroundings: “It would be “no good” to a journalist—for he is nowhere, ever, without his items; but it would be everything, always, to the mere restless analyst” (608). The “impression of felicity,” only reached through the mysterious faculty of “sensibility” is independent of isolatable “items.” It is a climate of feeling that permeates the whole space of the city, there before the separation of the world into individual “items,” collected and arranged by the journalistic subject, himself but one more “item” among others in an atomized world. The mode of apprehension which belongs to “the restless analyst,” by contrast, is one that prevents the breaking up of the world into a pre-formed world of substantial objects with properties to be apprehended and ordered by a reflecting consciousness. For “restless” analysis differs in kind from a mode of analysis that would seek to fix the terms analyzed into definitive positions. The “restless analyst” is impelled always onwards, each of his analyses dissolving away before they ever have time to be apprehended as such, a movement that parallels the situation of an atmospheric reading of *The American Scene*.

Rather than fixed descriptions of the various cities and landscapes visited by the narrator of *The American Scene*, what are often sought are intuitive impressions which precede the division of the world into subject and object. *The American Scene* can be read as a form of eco-phenomenology which operates according to what Bruce Bégout calls “the mersive approach”: “With the mersive approach, what we have in mind is an intuitive and non-analytic understanding of experience which allows for its own particular mode of appearing beneath and prior to the division between the psychic and the physical. In other words, an elucidation of presence from its tonal manifestation”⁶ (Bégout 36). As the light begins to fade in a Baltimore park, the text draws attention not to any present quality that could be isolated and defined, but to a vague, diffuse “medium” which surrounds all experience: “It was the diffused, mitigated glow, the happy medium itself that continued to be meanwhile half the picture.” (James, *The American Scene* 624).

⁶ « Avec l’approche mersive, ce que nous avons en vue est une compréhension intuitive et non analytique de l’expérience qui fasse droit à son mode de donation propre en deçà de la division du psychique et du physique. Autrement dit, une élucidation de la présence à partir de ses manifestations tonales. »

Though there may be constant reference to this enveloping medium that gives rise to any possible experience, the text is careful not to attempt to “capture” this medium in representational or definitional form. As the narrator enters “the sweet old Carroll house” at the end of the section on Baltimore, he senses “something vaguely haunted in its lonely refinement” (625). In response however to the thought that one might “try to capture [...] some lingering, living accents,” the narrator ultimately declares: “We capture verily, I think, nothing; we merely project a little, from one room and from one mild aspect of the void to another, our old habits of suppositions” (625).

We cannot “capture” the diffuse medium that produces the impression of “something vaguely haunted,” for this would imply constructing a larger, more encompassing medium around this quality. Our meager experience, based in “old habits of suppositions,” is not however diminished faced with the impossibility of capturing the quality of the atmosphere that envelops us: “There is a satisfaction of a sort, however, even in such arrested questions, when, as before this delicate faintly-resonant shell, each other element also helping, they have been vividly enough suggested” (625). The old house here stands in for the “delicate faintly-resonant shell” which at all times envelops our experience. Our response to our immersion in this resonating shell can only ever be a series of “arrested questions” which lead to no final elucidation of our immersed situation, but which nevertheless provide “satisfaction” when they are “vividly enough suggested.”

Conclusion

When we read literature atmospherically, as *The American Scene* invites us to do, we are not obliged to search for meanings or analyses, to parcel out reality into neat arrangements with the aid of the literary text. For the literary mode of knowing does not necessarily tell us anything about the world, but rather it stimulates and intensifies our present experience. The phenomena of atmospheres, Peter Sloterdijk claims, have long been ignored by the “[f]actual sciences” as “atmospheres are non-concrete and non-informative by nature (and did not seem controllable)” (Sloterdijk 137). It is for this reason that Sloterdijk claims that only literature has been able to adequately address the phenomenon: “[s]uperior atmospherologies only came about in the worlds of the great novelists” (137). When James draws our attention to our own immersion within atmospheres, it is not with the intent of *explaining* or even *describing* an experience of life. Rather, as James remarked on reading the work of Ivan Turgenev, whose vital realism inspired him to move beyond the literary forms which were on offer at the time, “It is life itself [...] and not this or that other story-teller’s more or less clever ‘arrangement’ of life” (James, “Ivan Turgénieff” 876). “Life itself” is precisely what cannot be *captured*, analyzed and dissected, but only experienced as it flickers by, always changing, dissolving into thin air before we ever have the chance to confront it face to face.

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