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Pamela Thurschwell

Bringing Nanda forward, or acting your age in *The Awkward Age*

> '. . . the whole question, don't you know? of bringing girls forward or not. The question of – well, what do you call it? – their exposure. It's *the* question, it appears – the question of the future; it's awfully interesting . . .'
>
> – Henry James, *The Awkward Age*[1]

Henry James's 1899 novel *The Awkward Age* posits the adolescent girl's movement forward into the future as an acute problem for the *fin de siècle*. The novel's titular pun equates the awkward, individual, in-between time of adolescence with the awkward, collective, in-between time of the *fin de siècle*, leading us both towards the turn-of-the-century 'invention' of the modern adolescent, and towards James's exploration of the culturally constructed nature of age as an identity category.[2] The conflation of individual ages with historical ones is significant; James's novel appeared on the cusp of a new century, at a moment when adolescence was in the process of being consolidated as a modern identity category by medical authorities, educators, and psychologists. The novel makes explicit the connection between modernity and adolescence, in ways that foreground its troubling adolescent Nanda Brookenham's 'exposure' to the dangerous world of adult knowledge that surrounds her. Its deploying of technologies such as the telegraph and the photograph, which mediate presence, speed time up, slow it down, and freeze it, posits the adolescent girl as cognate with modernity; both of her time and ahead of it. In the novel, adolescence is an awkward, unnerving presence, and a significant absence: an identity in the process of being formulated, and an age category to come.

The imperative 'act your age!' reminds us that age, like gender and sexuality, is always a performance, one at which we might potentially fail.[3] On the one hand, 'act your age!' asserts that so-called 'maturity' may not correspond to the number of years we have lived. On the other hand, 'act your age!' as a moral injunction, suggests that there is some ideal appropriate level of mature behaviour, and that a person's actual age should correspond to this level of maturity. For the young, 'acting your age' means you should behave in a less childish way; for the old, failing to act your age suggests you may be embarrassingly adopting too-youthful habits in your consumer choices or how you display sexual desire. But what happens when changing historical and

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economic circumstances shift cultural morays? Does what constitutes 'acting your age' shift as well? We might recognise the paradoxes of this imperative at our contemporary moment in which received notions of age-appropriate behaviour are rapidly changing. In a bleak economic landscape in which many young adults in the first world are finding it financially impossible to move out of their parents' houses, in which a subsection of adults spend a significant amount of their free time 'escaping' into gaming and young adult fiction, and in which older people are potentially infantilised by dwindling pensions and fraying social infrastructure, precarity across all ages means that traditional notions about age roles, adulthood, childhood, and adolescence, are adapting to new historical conditions. *The Awkward Age*, which centrally portrays the adolescent's uncomfortable fit with her contemporary moment, is an excellent place to look at how similar seismic shifts around age and modernity might have looked and felt in 1899.

Nanda, the marriageable but not (yet) married adolescent girl is the central focus for cultural anxiety in *The Awkward Age*. Nanda's awkward social position, her apparent inability to marry and achieve a heteronormative, developmental plotline, suggests that she embodies an impasse, but also a paradoxical possibility, for her era, and for the female *Bildungsroman* that traditionally ends in marriage. Nanda's anti-developmental narrative trajectory can be seen to exemplify Kathryn Bond Stockton's claims for the queer child's 'sideways growth', but refracted through the historically specific dilemmas of late nineteenth-century adolescence. Stockton suggests that sideways growth is: 'related but not reducible to the death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive . . . The child who by reigning cultural definitions can't "grow up" grows to the side of cultural ideals'.[4] *The Awkward Age* suggests that girls at the turn of the century may not, in Mrs Brookenham's suggestive spatio-temporal term of the epigraph, be able to progress 'forward', but that the self-consciously modern turn of the century may, in Stockton's terms, be an era conducive to sideways growth, not just for the individual, but for culture at large.

'Sideways' is a useful term both temporally and spatially. Recent work on queer time has involved dislodging the heteronormative assumptions implicit in rhetorical terms such as 'growing up' (or bringing girls 'forward') that structure our understanding of progressive historical time.[5] Queer theorists have set themselves the task of uncovering historical alternatives to the teleological stories of heteropatriarchy which dominate our understanding of history, engaging with a 'not yet' approach to the history of sexuality and culture that looks backwards, and sideways, to imagine different, more utopian, or at least more liveable, presents than the economically and environmentally precarious ones we currently inhabit.[6] A rich vein of related

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work has focused on the ways in which the figure of the queer child or childhood as queer, can be seen to trouble narratives of development.[7]

This valuable queer theoretical work on childhood, however, often fails to distinguish between the young child and the adolescent, collapsing them both into the figure of *the* child. Modern adolescence was a historically specific, transitional identity emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century, and which itself served to rewrite versions of the Romantic child.[8] If recent work on queer childhood sometimes reaches back to Freud's polymorphously perverse infant, in whom desire exists as pure impulse, before succumbing to the narrativising, developmental restrictions of Oedipal teleology, then literary critical and theoretical work on the adolescent needs to recognise the differing narrative imperatives that the messily and only partly embedded subject of adolescence responds to at historically different time periods.[9] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, adolescence as an identity category is in the process of being constructed as the point where the child encounters culture, history, and politics, as well as 'adult' sexuality. The adolescent, as he or she is imagined at the beginning of the twentieth century, is never innocent (in the way the child can be). Rather, she becomes a focus of cultural concern because she is always on the cusp of experience and adult teleological narrative expectations, but also always attuned to the modern, the 'not yet' of her culture.[10] In this article I will argue that *The Awkward Age* shows this version of adolescence emerging in relation to contemporary technologies; it portrays the adolescent's narrative trajectories in relation to modernity in ways that are harshly disciplinary within the historical moment of the novel, but potentially liberating, just over its horizon.

Contemporary James scholars have offered compelling readings of James's continued fascination with eroticised, potentially desiring, children, and the ways in which Jamesian thematic and stylistic obscurity coalesces around the question of children's sexual knowledge, destabilising epistemological certainty in his, arguably proto-modernist, work from the 1880s and 1890s.[11] *The Awkward Age*'s focus on adolescence engages with these concerns, but the questions surrounding knowledge and identity shift in relation to the older child: the potentially marriageable, in-the-process-of-being-sexualised, girl who self-consciously theorises the stakes of her own knowledge, and the future she represents. In a brilliant reading of the novel, David Kurnick, too, sees it as turned toward the future. Arguing that the theatrical scene-setting of the book addresses an audience yet to come, Kurnick connects the book's insistent proleptic verbal structures to its 'ambition to imagine a world that would sustain the radical values described in the novel'.[12] For Kurnick, *The Awkward Age*'s proleptic style and its consistent use of foggy, under-descriptions of characters and settings looks towards a future which cannot be staged within the social boundaries of the novel's world. One crucial, simultaneously

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over-described and under-described, category, unremarked by Kurnick, is age. Individuals' ages in the novel are referred to constantly, and often specifically, but in terms that are as likely to be false as true. Age is always performed in *The Awkward Age*, and these performances lend central importance to the slippery, transitional space of adolescence.

From the beginning of *The Awkward Age*, the adolescent girl is portrayed as a puzzling inconvenience to the adult world. Nanda is both temporally and spatially awkward for her mother: temporally, her age (18) gives away Mrs Brook's (41), and spatially, the presence of a young unmarried girl in the drawing room sets limits on the kind of disencumbered, risqué talk on which Mrs Brook's set thrives. The book's characters constantly harp on Nanda's location in the house, upstairs or downstairs, participating in her mother's circle or receiving visitors in her own sitting room. But it is not simply the adolescent girls', Nanda, and Aggie's, problematic ages and locations that are awkward for the book; nearly every character's age is both foregrounded and vague. The book's obsessive discussions of the ages of its characters both carefully delineate and deliberately obfuscate individual ages. Age becomes an artificial act in which the differences between adults and children are finessed and broken down, paradoxically unravelling as a stable method for categorising people, even as the novel is obsessed with individuals' ages. The first scene between the elder Longdon and the younger Vanderbank is a veritable explosion of age consideration – 'Although Longdon will never again see fifty-five,' if 'he could not look young, he came near . . . looking new' (p.3). On the same page when Van confesses to being thirty-four, Longdon replies 'I'm a hundred and three' (p.3). You don't have to hunt around to try and determine how old people are in this novel; there's an age, whether real or fabricated, on almost every page.[13] Rarely in James do we have so much exact and explicit discussion of people's ages. In much of his other 1890s work which concerns itself with children and the process of coming to (implicitly sexual) knowledge, age becomes an important, but rarely explicit, issue. I have had classes spend a lot of time trying to dig up Miles's, Flora's and Maisie's exact ages – in part because twenty-first century readers continue to want children to act like children, and find it disturbing when they do not. The novel's close but obfuscating attention to age forces its readers to acknowledge the porous boundaries between childish and adult behaviour, and the constructed nature of this division.

In what follows I will explore some the rhetoric of modernity that resonates throughout the book in relation to the awkward age of the adolescent. In the first section, I will consider further the novel's uses and misuses of lying about one's, or someone else's, age. In the second, I will look at Mrs Brookenham's use of the train and telegram as figures for the adolescent. In the third, I will consider the novel's interest in the word 'exposure' in its varied meanings

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including the photographic and the sexual. In the fourth and final section, I will end by suggesting that by refocusing our attention on age in *The Awkward Age*, we might begin to see the ways in which age itself becomes a creation of James's, a staging of possible relations (sexual, conversational, economic, theatrical, performative, even utopian-collective) between older and younger interlocutors who swing between being 'adults' and 'children', with the *fin-de-siècle* invention of the adolescent as a hinge for this process.

1 Hotter than my Daughter

Initially the reason behind *The Awkward Age*'s age obsession appears straightforward, in a book that resembles a late-Victorian version of the British reality TV show 'Hotter than my daughter'. In the very first conversation between Van and Longdon it is revealed that Mrs Brookenham lies about Nanda's age in order to conceal her own. She has been telling people that Nanda is 16 for the last two years. In Longdon's eyes this is a sign both of the decadent immorality of the group and of something less than chivalrous in Van, who exposes Mrs Brook's duplicity. But if Nanda's and her mother's ages are (according to James's preface) the kernel of the book's age obsession, it is evident that age confusion envelopes the entire novel. Van is 'Old Van' while Mrs Brookenham 'was, in her forty first year still charmingly pretty . . . She had about her the pure light of youth' (p.27), 'she looks about three . . . She simply looks a baby' (p.165). Nanda's parasitic, grasping, grown brother Harold is also described by his mother as a 'mere baby', who 'doesn't want for nurses' (p.32). In the course of their sparring banter, the Duchess and Mrs Brook place Nanda's age at 20, and then 30. Mitchy, who marries the apparently pristine young Aggie, finds himself immediately cuckolded and prematurely aging, according to Mrs Brook: 'It seems so odd to think of Mitchy as a young thing. He's as old as all time, and his wife, who the other day was about six, is now practically about forty' (p.296). Not only are most of the characters in the book described in confusing terms that swing between old and young, but some of their ages are in fact logically inconsistent.[14] *The Awkward Age*, then, is really awkward about ages, and at great length.[15]

The many bantering, often catty, conversations about age in the book fall into two categories: one highlights the age-mismatched couples (often, but not always, featuring older women and younger men). This problem comes to the forefront in critical readings of the final chapter of the book, which was the focus of an ongoing debate about whether Nanda is married to, or adopted by Longdon when she retreats with him to his country estate, Beccles, at the end.[16] The second use of age returns us to the structuring parallel between individuals' ages, and the collective experience of time passing; the historical sense of age. The awkward age is both adolescence and the awkwardly

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self-conscious 1890s, caught between Victorian values and whatever might follow them. Here the book's obsession with ages also serves to highlight the difference between those who are 'modern' and those who are 'old' or old-fashioned. 'Old' Van is finally less flexible in his understanding of the damaged, modern girl Nanda than the older, but more modern, Longdon, who is capable of taking her as she is. Whether that taking is as a daughter or as a wife almost seems beside the point, when these relations and the age differences that might circumscribe them have ceased to have clearly defined boundaries.

2 'It is she – the modern daughter'

At the end of Book 4 of the novel, yet another party assembles at Mrs Brookenham's to discuss the central conversational topic of the book, 18-year-old Nanda's passage from childhood to adulthood through the treacherous, innuendo-filled, sexually knowing conversation that suffuses the drawing rooms she has begun to frequent. Nanda is out of the house during this particular conversation, but in her absence her possible futures (is she marriageable or not marriageable? Should she be downstairs or upstairs?) are extensively discussed by her mother and three of her mother's male callers who vie, in a nearly parodic fairy-tale structure, for the privilege of being visited by Nanda. (The scene establishes that she, perhaps scandalously, does visit men on her own.) The three men present are: her potential, although deeply ambivalent suitor, Vanderbank; the lecherous, married, Mr Cashmore, and the elderly Mr Longdon, representative of a past, idealised, generation when girls were not 'exposed' in the way that Nanda has been. Nanda is the spitting image of her grandmother, the Lady Julia, with whom Longdon was once in love, but Nanda is in no way an exact replica of the proper Lady Julia, as her looser moral code indicates. The chapter winds up with the assembled company of men, considering whether they should wait for Nanda's return from her outing, in the hopes of seeing her. As Mr Longdon lingers, uncertain about whether to depart, the following event occurs:

> 'Ah, when she's once on the loose –!' Mrs Brookenham sighed: 'Unless *la voilà*,' she said as a hand was heard at the door-latch. It was only, however, a footman who entered with a little tray that, on his approaching his mistress, offered to sight the brown envelope of a telegram. She immediately took leave to open this missive, after the quick perusal of which she had another vision of them all. 'It *is* she – the modern daughter. "Tishy keeps me dinner and opera: clothes all right; return uncertain, but if before morning have latch-key." She won't come home till morning!' said Mrs Brook. (p.132)

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What is it that Mrs Brook announces with her portentous, symbolic 'It *is* she'? In this scene, the modern daughter appears to consist primarily of a telegraphed absence, detailing Nanda's extended exit from the family home. She travels with the New Woman accoutrement of a latch key, signifying her ease of movement and independence, and facilitating her uncertain return. However, Nanda is not a financially independent New Woman, and it's never suggested that she might permanently leave the house except via the traditional route of marriage. She is, instead, somewhere in between. Earlier in the scene Mrs Brook says about her lack of knowledge of Nanda's current whereabouts: 'I do all I can to enter into her life, but you can't get into a railway train while it's on the rush' (p.108). Trains and telegraphs are both 'fast' modern technologies, that the adolescent girl appears to resemble: 'It *is* she – the modern daughter' (presumably Mrs Brook gestures towards the telegram in that dash). In her bodily absence, Nanda becomes a virtual presence, the very essence of the modern. The oddly worded 'she had another vision of them all' suggests foresight, introducing Nanda's telegraphed absence to the assembled company as a gleefully prophetic announcement. Mrs Brook's theatrical interventions conjure the scene of herself, the absent Nanda, and her 'suitors' as a potentially sexualised spectacle, manufacturing a 'vision', both for those awaiting Nanda, and for the reader. A group of adults anticipate the arrival of the adolescent girl, whose presence throughout the book can be seen as virtual or visionary – as 'not here yet'. Simultaneously, however, the book suggests that this spectral adolescent presence is also far too embodied and real, embedded awkwardly in the time and space of the house in which she is not completely welcome. Mrs Brook's theatrical tableau might be viewed as an allegory for the way the novel functions in relation to its twin themes, modernity and adolescence. The adolescent is both too present (her insistent bodily presence in the drawing room revealing her mother's age and putting a stop to frank conversation) and already, unsettlingly absent.

Within the world of the novel, the prematurely knowing Nanda and the 16-year-old blank slate Aggie share a predicament; their exposure to, or protection from, an adult world of sexual knowledge and innuendo is presented as having far-reaching effects in terms of their prospects as commodities on the marriage market. In the preface, James claims the novel focuses on 'minor "social phenomena"' particularly, 'the note one had inevitably to take of the difference made in certain friendly houses and for certain flourishing mothers by the sometimes dreaded, often delayed, but never fully arrested coming to the forefront of some vague slip of a daughter' (p.xxx). Is this problem of the adolescent girl (and her mother) a large or small one? In the rhetoric of the novel, what may seem a potentially minor feminine 'crisis' (p.xxx) – shifting manners and morals, and mothers whose daughters' sexual eligibility serves to announce their own waning attractions – expands

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to become *the* modern problem; in fact, it becomes *the* problem of modernity, Mrs Brook's 'question of the future'. The question of the small becoming the large is one that preoccupied James at the time. Planned as a short story, *The Awkward Age* grew out of all proportion. Looking back from the vantage of the prefaces, James claims that *The Awkward Age* and his other literary productions of the 1890s: 'were projected as small things, yet had finally to be provided for as comparative monsters' (p.xxix). The unexpected, unruly growth from the apparently trivial (and feminine) to the world-defining was mirrored by the expanding length of the work itself. There is a parallel between form and content here which suggests that there are inherent pleasures and dangers for James in watching small things, such as children, or short stories, grow, even grow grotesquely: the way in which something apparently minor (James's exploration of the proper raising of a 'vague slip of a daughter' (p.xxx)) expands into the monstrous makes the growth process seem both normative (we all grow up) and horrifying; inevitable, yet by no means 'natural'.[17]

Growing up and moving forward are clearly difficult and undesired processes for many of the inhabitants of the book. For instance, the narrative itself, although revolving around the possibility of Nanda's growing up, and entering a progressive reproductive teleology through marriage, is theatrical and scenic, staged as a series of tableaux revolving almost entirely around dialogue. The characters in the novel, with the exception of Mr Longdon, are all committed to the primacy of what Mrs Brook calls 'good talk' over action. 'Good talk: you know – no one, dear Van, should know better – what part for me that plays. Therefore when one has deliberately to make one's talk bad!' (p.189). When Van laughs at her implied definitions of bad and good talk, she defines 'bad' talk: 'You know what I mean – stupid, flat, fourth-rate' (p.190). Aesthetic categories, revolving around the set's conversational performances, take precedence over moral ones. At one point Mrs Brook describes the question of whether or not Carrie Donner will bolt from her husband with another man as 'the delight of our life' (p.117). The circular 'she won't/she will!' discussion keeps them all in pleasurable suspense; gossip thrives on speculation and circulation, loving what has not yet taken place, as well as what might or might not have already taken place. In the economy of the novel, as David Kurnick has argued, 'good' talk becomes a kind of queer, theatrical, collective project (at times a substitute for, or supplement to, the illicit sexual relations the characters may or may not be having with each other).[18] Talk is an end in itself, and Mrs Brook's set, which circulates it, is engaging in an alternative form of reproduction, one that should constitutively exclude unmarried young women who should remain ignorant and innocent of its terms of reference. The adolescent girl (as Aggie's secluded upbringing indicates) should not be included in the talk; rather she is the *object* of the talk.

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Mrs Brook, the novel's most consistent theoriser of modernity, makes the strongest claim for the urgent need to talk about the social placement of the adolescent girl, saying, 'the whole question, don't you know? of bringing girls forward or not. The question of – well, what do you call it? – their exposure. It's *the* question, it appears – the question of the future' (p.129). The teleological forward movement of the rhetoric here connects 'exposure' to the very possibility of a future. In one fairly obvious sense, the problem of how to bring up, and bring out, the adolescent girl, is indeed *the* question of the future, in that if girls are not 'brought forward' there may be no future for the classes with which James is concerned: if upper-class adolescent girls are prematurely exposed to sexual knowledge and hence made unmarriageable (as we see happening to Nanda), then a reproductive future for them within the bonds of conventional marriage is impossible. If this problem became widespread, then social conventions and expectations for adolescent girls would have to change, or the class could not reproduce itself; there would be no future for the English upper classes.[19] If the inhabitants of the novel seem to prefer episodic narrative, 'good talk', and gossip to marriage, reproduction, and 'progress', then the shadow of 1890s fears (of the loss of empire, race degeneration, sterility, or more generally what Dorian Gray calls '*fin de siècle/fin du globe*'[20] also hovers over the world of the book. One way *The Awkward Age* has been read is through *fin-de-siècle* anxieties about degeneration, the New Woman, and the decline of empire, and the English upper classes, as well as through the new social sciences which were tackling these thorny questions.[21] Nanda may not be able to reproduce herself, and the race, but we find in an early scene of the novel another form of reproduction also at issue: the time-capturing, reproducible photograph.

3 'Do they give their portraits now?'

Both Nanda and Longdon alternately seem to flounder in, and rise above, the self-consciously modern moment of the novel; they both portray themselves as anachronistic. As Longdon says, 'I've slept half the century – I'm Rip van Winkle' (p.147). In another scene, when Van flirtatiously suggests that he and Nanda might 'grow up' together, she replies that this would not be possible: ' "Ah, if moving is changing," she returned, "there won't be much for me in that. I shall never change – I shall always be just the same. The same old-mannered, modern, slangy hack . . . what I am, I must remain. I haven't what's called a principle of growth" ' (p.142). Like Longdon, Nanda is a strange mix: the 'fast' modern girl who is simultaneously static and unmoving; she is a dissonant combination of the old and the new, which appears to lead toward a deadly impasse.

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Nanda's stubborn, poignant vision of herself as arrested but also detached from her own time, unable to move forward, yet also unmistakably modern, is both part of her own self-construction and related to that ambivalent Jamesian freedom (a freedom which she enjoys – it gives her ease of movement and a latch key – and which has also been imposed on her by her mother's policy of not shielding her from knowledge). It is not precisely that Nanda is unmarriageable, she just can't love anyone (like Mitchy) who would be modern enough to love someone like her. She is spoiled in terms of the old-fashioned marriage market by all that she knows; she has been overexposed. As she amazingly describes herself at one point, 'but my situation, my exposure – all the results of them that I show. Doesn't one become a sort of little drain-pipe with everything flowing through?' (p.241).

These rhetorics of stasis and flow, but also of anachronism and modernity, that pulse through the novel, create awkward relations between the old and the new, between fast and slow time. One way in which the adolescent girl comes to embody these temporal contradictions is through the book's deployment of technologies of communication and capture, telegraphs and photographs. The photograph has been seen as the technology of anachronism, par excellence, which for the first time in the nineteenth century allowed for an uncanny indexical relation to past selves in the present moment; letting people view themselves and others, as young and new, even when they were no longer either.[22] The repeated use of the word 'exposure' and its correlates suggestively points two ways in the novel, towards Nanda's premature exposure to sexual knowledge and towards the photographic exposure.[23] It is no coincidence that Mrs Brook focuses on adolescent girls' 'exposure' as '*the* question of the future' (p.129). Like the telegraph that points towards the modern adolescent girl's not being here, at least not yet, the photograph also represents her potent absence (and anachronism) in a significant form in the first encounter between Longdon and Van in Van's rooms. Here the two discuss the Duchess's niece, Little Aggie, whom she has adopted as a daughter, and brought from the Continent to try to marry 'some great man'. Vanderbank says, 'She's rather lovely, little Aggie.' To which Longdon replies that perhaps Van is the 'great' man she will marry. Van replies:

> 'Well then, to show you how right you are, there's the young lady.' He pointed to an object on one of the tables, a small photograph with a very wide border of something that looked like crimson fur.
>
> Mr. Longdon took up the picture; he was serious now. 'She's very beautiful – but she's not a little girl.'
>
> 'At Naples they develop early. She's only seventeen or eighteen, I suppose; but I never know how old – or at least how young – girls are,

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> and I'm not sure . . . She gave me the portrait – frame and all. The frame is Neapolitan enough, and little Aggie is charming.' Then Vanderbank subjoined: 'But not so charming as little Nanda.'
>
> 'Little Nanda? – have you got her?' The old man was all eagerness.
>
> 'She's over there beside the lamp – also a present from the original.'

This scene once again represents the novel's constitutive age mystification – here Van insists he never knows how old or how young 'little girls' are – Aggie's age might be 17 or 18: is that old or young? It also raises the question of what it might mean for older gentlemen to 'have' photos of younger girls – "Little Nanda? – Have you got her?" The old man was all eagerness.' The barely disguised lechery of the scene continues.

> Mr Longdon had gone to the place – little Nanda was in glazed white wood. He took her up and held her out; for a moment he said nothing, but presently over his glasses, rested on his host a look intenser even than his scrutiny of the faded image. 'Do they give their portraits now?'
>
> 'Little girls – innocent lambs? Surely, to old friends. Didn't they in your time?'
>
> Mr Longdon studied the portrait again: after which, with an exhalation of something between superiority and regret, 'They never did to me,' he replied.
>
> 'Well, you can have all you want now!' Vanderbank laughed.
>
> His friend gave a slow, droll head-shake. 'I don't want them "now"!'
>
> 'You could do with them, my dear sir, still,' Vanderbank continued in the same manner, 'every bit *I* do!'
>
> 'I'm sure you do nothing you oughtn't,' Mr. Longdon kept the photograph and continued to look at it. (pp.10–11)

What have you got when you have that photographic portrait? Do you 'have' the girl herself? In what spirit are these photographs given? Are they advertisements for marriageability – display of the items for sale – or are they a child's portrait for an old family friend (to freeze for ever that youthful moment)? [24] The potential meanings of the photographic portrait of the girl – as child or young woman – come into uneasy collision in this scene. Susan Mizruchi, in an article which reads *The Awkward Age* in relation to late nineteenth-century anthropology, draws our attention to the fact that Nanda and Aggie are both initially introduced as 'photographed images' – mechanical reproductions – but 'framed in natural materials'.[25] Surrounded by crimson fur and glazed white wood, Nanda and Aggie seem both natural and artificial, decadent and innocent. As Mizruchi also points out, the photographic portrait of the young girl foreshadows a drive towards, developmental standardisation:

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'these images emphasize tactics of socialization, eerily foreshadowing the cataloguing record of twentieth century American public schools, a yearly photograph of the child as he or she is gradually absorbed into the social system'.[26] If *The Awkward Age* is concerned with the best way of defining the correct social role for girls of Nanda and Aggie's ages, then their photographs, which should be one way of fixing them, seem suggestively ambiguous. In scenes such as this, from *The Awkward Age*, we see the adolescent girl in the process of being exposed to the gaze of others who attempt, unsuccessfully, to fix them.

This way of introducing the problematic nature of Nanda and Aggie through the photograph plays on that double meaning of 'exposure'. Critics have argued that James was suspicious of photography as an art form that competed with his own psychological version of realism. In his late memoir, *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), James recalls an early experience as a young boy having his daguerreotype taken; he recalls the visiting Thackeray making fun of his excessively buttoned jacket:

> My sense of my jacket became from that hour a heavy one. . . . It had been revealed to me thus in a flash that we were somehow queer, and though never exactly crushed by it I became aware that I at least felt so as I stood with my head in Mr. Brady's vise. Beautiful most decidedly the lost art of daguerreotype; I remember the 'exposure' as on this occasion interminably long . . .[27]

James's exposure here is also of a double nature, head held in the vice necessary to keep the subject from moving and ruining the picture, he has also been exposed to Thackeray's amused gaze, and consequently to the potentially amused or judgemental gaze of posterity; he feels almost crushed by the daguerreotype vice, as he will feel anguished by later photographs of himself.[28] The photographic portrait exposure, for James, clearly resonates with the word's many other meanings; the ways in which photography (and, of course, novelists) put on display what perhaps should not be displayed (affective states, interiority) finds an echo in the world of sexual adult knowledge to which Nanda has been prematurely exposed.

In this early scene then, Nanda and Aggie are exposed to the gaze of the world, or at least curious, older men, through the photographs they have given to Van, which disperse them into multiple copies. (In this sense, Longdon could easily 'have' them too.) These photographs also contribute towards marking the adolescent girl as a recognisable 'type'. If the crude joke revealed by Longdon and Van's exchange has to do with their banter's construction of blurred lines between images of children and of marriageable, sexually

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available, women, then the development of the category of the modern adolescent girl might help to contain the anxiety around that confusion. The photographic exposure of the adolescent girl, in this sense, seems to limn Mrs Brook's 'question of the future'; it appears that a new category may be necessary to redefine the lines which are fast collapsing around the presumption of girlhood innocence. One urgent 'question of the future' at the end of the nineteenth century, for Sigmund Freud, in 'Dora'[29] as well as for Henry James in so many of his fictions of the 1890s, coalesces around the transfer of sexual knowledge from one generation to the next. Given that 'exposure' to sexual knowledge will inevitably happen (or, according to Freud may have always already happened) how can we trace its paths, understand its terms of transmission? How can one be 'modern' about this kind of exposure?[30]

The technology of the photograph emphasises Nanda's modernity even as her uncanny resemblance to her grandmother, Lady Julia, pulls her image backwards into the past and towards earlier forms of portraiture. Van and Longdon, discussing Nanda's features, compete to push her image further backwards in time:

> 'It isn't a bit modern. It's a face of Sir Thomas Lawrence – '
> 'It's a face of Gainsborough!' Mr Longdon returned with spirit. 'Lady Julia herself harked back.'
> Vanderbank, clearly was equally touched and amused. 'Let us say at once that it's a face of Raphael.' (p.97).

What is Nanda's correct 'age'? The age of Lawrence, Gainsborough, Raphael, or photography? Or, alternatively, the age 16, 18, or 30, as her mother variously claims? What historical era or cultural milieu might serve to contain or explain her, the girl who can describe herself oxymoronically as 'the same old-mannered, modern, slangy hack'?

I want to suggest some of the reasons why I think it is worthwhile to return to the apparently manifest topic of the shifting, virtual ages of *The Awkward Age*, to think anew about what has been portrayed as the birth of the modern adolescent around the turn of the century.

4 The beginning of a new age

As I have been arguing, *The Awkward Age* self-consciously foregrounds individuals' ages, while simultaneously foregrounding the threatened *fin-de-siècle* collectivity of Mrs Brook's salon as an age in decline.[31] This combination creates the possibility for staging a new creature: 'the modern daughter'. As Mrs Brook says:

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> 'Nanda has stepped on the stage, and I give her up the house. Besides . . . it's awfully interesting. It *is* the modern daughter – we're really "doing" her, the child and I; and as the modern has always been my own note – I've gone in, I mean frankly for my very own Time – who is one, after all, that one should pretend to decline to go where it may lead?'

This presentation of Mrs Brook and Nanda 'doing' the modern daughter together sees the adolescent girl as both a theatrical production and a group effort that requires the contributions of more than one participant. It also shows Mrs Brook 'going in for' her own time, the modern, as if historical eras, as well as individual ages, could be freely chosen rather than unhappily assigned.

The Awkward Age asks, finally, what it might mean to 'do' the modern daughter. Is there a future for Nanda, in which she might 'grow sideways', to return to Kathryn Bond Stockton's formulation? The novel's finale, in one sense, seems to suggest that the answer is no. The end sees Nanda retreating from the modern theatricals of her mother, into anachronism and the past, to Beccles with Longdon, to be, perhaps, fixed like her photographic portrait in his remembered image of her grandmother. But what happens if we bracket this compelling reading that emphasises Nanda's non-reproductive future as a defeat? Instead, I want briefly to connect *The Awkward Age*'s 'morbid modernity' to Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* to look sideways at the 1890s for a future for adolescence. *Jude the Obscure* is another novel of that decade which combines, to tragic effect, a fascination with the old, the new, and the degenerative threat of non-reproduction. At the end of *Jude* the prematurely aged child (or adolescent?), Father Time, hangs his younger siblings, because there appears to him to be no proper time or space into which they might grow up. Throughout the novel, Jude, because of his modern desire for an education beyond his class, and their too-modern sexual relationship, repeatedly portrays himself and Sue as born prematurely, in the wrong time. Jude's son, Father Time, is described after his suicide, in the terms of contemporary degeneration theory, as a harbinger of a coming race of boys 'unknown in the last generation. They seem to see all its terrors before they have the staying power to resist them'; his short life and early death predict 'the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live'.[32]

Nanda also seems to achieve a similarly spooky prophetic clarity in the final page of *The Awkward Age*, when she speaks to Longdon about herself as a type that is already in the ascendant: ' "We're many of us, we're most of us – as you long ago saw and showed you felt – extraordinary now. We can't help it. It really isn't our fault. There's so much else that's extraordinary that if we're in it all so much we must naturally be." It was all obviously clearer to her than it had ever been, and her sense of it found renewed expression; so that she might

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have been, as she wound up, a very much older person than her friend. "Everything's different from what it used to be" ' (p.366). Nanda's announcement makes her seem Sybil-like, to resemble a much older person than she is, her own version of Father Time. When she declares, 'We're many of us, we're most of us . . . extraordinary now', she gestures toward the extraordinary contemporary moment, in which girls, on the model of the New Woman, are making themselves extraordinary, by not marrying, and not reproducing their social circumstances. But Nanda also seems to posit herself as a harbinger of a possible future, whether that future is the dying out of the upper classes, or the adaptations to modernity necessary for it to continue. Significantly here she becomes a part of a 'we', a gathering of forces.

James's novel dramatises the predicament of the adolescent who, at the end of the nineteenth century, is taking up more and more space, emotionally, financially, literally (in the house, on the streets, jangling her latch key), and who is simultaneously becoming a preoccupation for a culture which is creating an explosion of discourse around the codification, criminalisation, medicalisation, and education of the adolescent at this exact moment. James's thwarted desire, in the preface to constrain the size of *The Awkward Age*, suggests that the novel, like its adolescent subject, also grows sideways, refusing certain versions of development and teleology (the *Bildungsroman*; the marriage plot) while inviting different kinds of structure and alliance – Nanda's surprising 'we' at the end. *The Awkward Age* is a radical experiment in dramatising and manufacturing, not just the identity category of modern adolescence, but received categories about age, both individual and historical.

Setting itself self-consciously at the beginning of a new age, in one sense, *The Awkward Age* clearly portrays the modern adolescent as a teleological dead end; Nanda's exit from the possibility of reproducing herself (as her grandmother did) rings a small but significant warning knell for class and empire. However, there is also an affirmation in that figure of morbid modernity, inasmuch as it becomes associated with this emerging identity category, adolescence. James's perversely funny, and catty, experiments in *The Awkward Age* with age refuse some identities and alliances, but invite others. On the one hand, there is something morally askew, and inevitably commercial, about erotic encounters between the very young and the very old in the book; questions of exposure, of who can have whom, in what forms, and how much they will pay, always arise. On the other hand, these encounters stage a stretching of the boundaries of elective affinities across and beyond generational differences; they pave the way for Nanda's exit from her family into a new future for adolescence.

The two prophets of *The Awkward Age*, Mrs Brook and Nanda, suggest then that the book should be read as a performance of a modern future that the novel itself can't quite imagine: one in which the adolescent might be a

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carrier of a modernity which is not necessarily morbid but certainly collective (in which Nanda's extraordinary 'we' might turn into a more joyful one), one in which tribal elected affinities – such as Mrs Brook's set – will begin to have more purchase, at a younger age, than the family of origin; one in which the space for modern 'free' experimentation and exposure to knowledge will start to open up; one in which individual age might begin to be understood as a construct that cannot be separated from collective age. This vision of an adolescence yet to come returns us to Mrs Brook's triumphant telegraphed announcement of the absent modern daughter, and the book's unrealized desire for a virtual adolescence that does not, cannot, yet exist.[33]

Notes

1 Henry James, *The Awkward Age*, ed. Vivien Jones (Oxford: World's Classics, 1999), 129. Hereafter, page references to this edition will be given in the text.

2 The modern category of adolescence is usually presented as having been codified by the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall's massive 1904 two-volume *Adolescence*. This is an intriguing claim because the book's vastness and inner contradictions makes it almost impossible to imagine how it could have codified anything. For more on the construction of adolescence at the turn of the twentieth century via Hall and others, historically and theoretically, see Sarah Bilston, *The Awkward Age in Women's Popular Fiction, 1850–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sarah E. Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 200); Pamela Thurschwell, 'Freud's Stepchild: Adolescent Subjectivity and Psychoanalysis', in *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past*, ed. Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 173–192.

3 See Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (London: Routledge, 2001).

4 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 13.

5 See Lee Edelman, *Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Freeman (ed.), *GLQ* special issue, *Queer Temporalities*, 13:2–3 (2007).

6 See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press), 2011; Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex or the Unbearable* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2014; José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013). In *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch formulates the future as the *Noch Nicht* (Not Yet) or the *Noch-nicht-bewusst* (Not-yet-conscious), a future that is embedded in the past and the present, but which may or may not emerge. (Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), vol.1). José Muňoz engages with Bloch's ideas in *Cruising Utopia* to envision a queer futurity that reaches back to the resources of the past.

7 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'How to Bring your Kids up Gay', in *Tendencies*, ed. E.K. Sedgwick (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 154–64; Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (eds), *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Stockton, *The Queer Child*.

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8 See Pamela Thurschwell, 'Freud's Stepchild'; and 'Psychoanalysis, Literature, and the "Case" of Adolescence', in *A Concise Companion to Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Culture*, ed. Laura Marcus and Ankhi Mukherjee (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 167–89.

9 There is excellent historical and sociological work on twentieth-century adolescence (e.g. Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth 1875–1945* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007); Lesko, *Act Your Age!*). There is less literary critical work that considers it as a category separate from childhood. An exception is Jed Esty's *Unseasonable Youth* which brilliantly argues for the return in the modernist novel to the narrative of the failed adolescent *Bildungsroman*, linking it to early twentieth-century colonialist narratives of progress and decline. (Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

10 In *Adolescence*, G. Stanley Hall also conceives of adolescence as a kind of evolutionary 'not yet'. He insists that adolescence is the evolutionary taking-off point for a changed future for the race, writing that adolescence, 'and not maturity as now defined, is the only point of departure for the super-anthropoid that man is to become' (Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, 2 vols (New York: D. Appleton, 1925), vol.2, 94).

11 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Shame, Theatricality and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of Novel*', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, ed. E.K. Sedgwick (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 35–66; David Kurnick, '"Horrible Impossible": Henry James's Awkward Stage', *Henry James Review*, 26 (2005), 109–29; Kevin Ohi, 'Narrating the Child's Queerness in *What Maisie Knew*', in *Curiouser*, ed. Bruhm and Hurley, 81–106.

12 Kurnick, '"Horrible Impossible"', 114.

13 Michèle Mendelssohn points out that age is a 'running gag' in *The Awkward Age*, connecting it to the contemporary public outcry over juvenile prostitution and the age of consent. ('"I'm not a bit expensive": Henry James and the Sexualization of the Victorian Girl", in *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2008), 81–93 (p.86).

14 See Séamus Cooney, 'Awkward Ages in *The Awkward Age*', *Modern Language Notes*, 75 (March 1960), 208–211. In the first chapters we learn that Van is 7 years old before Longdon loved and lost Lady Julia to Mrs Brook's father. So Van must be at least seven years older than Mrs Brookenham. But Van is said to be 34 (p.3) and Mrs Brook is 41 (p.27). Cooney points out this inconsistency, whereas I see a principle of age inconsistency, or dissonance, governing the whole novel.

15 See Daniel J. Schneider, '"James's *The Awkward Age*: A Reading and an Evaluation", *Henry James Review*, 1:3 (Spring 1980), 219–27, for an extended analysis of the ways in which age and youth switch places in the book; Mrs Brook becomes young while Nanda becomes old. Clearly this resonates with other works by James including *The Sacred Fount*'s vampiric dynamics. For more on ages in the novel, also see Mendelssohn, '"I'm not a bit expensive"', 86.

16 Cooney suggests that Yvor Winters was the first to bring up the possibility of marriage rather than adoption ('Awkward Ages in *The Awkward Age*', 209). Also see James's first, disavowed melodramatic novel *Watch and Ward*.

17 In the language of the preface, James takes up a position of a fond but vexed parent. See Sedgwick on the prefaces ('Shame, Theatricality and Queer Performativity', 35–66). Also see Stockton, *The Queer Child*, for the ways in which the queer child's 'growing sideways' estranges our sense of developmental processes and teleological growth toward maturity that we usually take for granted in children.

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18 Kurnick, '"Horrible Impossible"', 118.

19 These are fears that hover around discussions of the New Woman and degeneration as has been richly documented. See Mizruchi who reads *The Awkward Age* in relation to contemporary anthropological debates: 'The novel makes its way, with a relentless determination, towards sterility and division' (Susan L. Mizruchi,. 'Reproducing Women in *The Awkward Age*', *Representations*, 38 (Spring 1992), 101–30 (p.105).

20 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Critical Edition, ed. Donald L. Lawler Norton (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1988), 138.

21 See Mizruchi, 'Reproducing Women'.

22 For the most influential consideration of the photograph as uncanny, linked to the freezing of life as death, and to anachronism, see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage Classics, 1993). James's exploration of photographic exposure and the exposure of the young woman, of course, proceeds in a different direction.

23 J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), connects James's word 'exposed' to James's use of 'exhibition' in his preface, suggesting that *The Awkward Age* may be 'an act of indecent exposure' (p.104). My interest here is in specific rhetorics of the photographic exposure.

24 I will admit that all my attempts to analyse the many valences of this fabulously perverse Jamesian exchange get hung up on exactly what it is that the proper Mr Longdon imagines that Van oughtn't to do with his photographs of adolescent girls, and what it is Van is suggesting that he *does* do, and that Longdon could do as well. *Mendelsohn* also singles out this passage for comment (Mendelssohn, '"I'm not a bit expensive"', 88).

25 Susan L. Mizruchi, 'Reproducing Women in *The Awkward Age*', *Representations*, 38 (Spring 1992), 101–30 (p.120).

26 Ibid.

27 Henry James, *Autobiography: A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 52.

28 Julie Grossman analyses this scene in relation to James's 'scopophobia' ('"It's the Real Thing": Henry James, Photography, and *The Golden Bowl*', *Henry James Review*, 15:3 (Fall 1994), 309–28 (p.310)). Laura Saltz similarly considers James's distrust of the photograph which simultaneously reveals too much (about the imperfections of the body) and too little (about the inner self). She also points towards James's use of the word 'exposure' at other points in his autobiography ('Henry James's Overexposures', *Henry James Review*, 25:3 (Fall 2004), 254–266).

29 Sigmund Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (Dora)', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (1953–74)* (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis), vol.7; Penguin Freud Library, vol.8, 29–64.

30 Critics have pointed to the ways in which Freud's case history 'Dora' engages with precisely the same questions and anxieties about young women's sexual knowledge which so fascinate James. See Neil Hertz, 'Dora's Secrets, Freud's Techniques', in *In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria, Feminism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (London: Virago, 1985), 221–42, and Bilston, *The Awkward Age*.

31 A strain of *fin-de-siècle* apocalypticism runs throughout the novel. Mitchy, for instance, 'thinks nothing matters. He says we've all come to a pass that's the end of everything' (p.152).

32 Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 266.

33 Many friends have responded to versions of this article over an embarrassing number of years. Thank you, Geoff Gilbert, Kevin Ohi, Ruth Charnock, Pete Coviello, Lauren Berlant, Kasia Boddy, Chris Nealon, Jed Esty, and Jim Endersby amongst others.

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