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## FORMS OF NOSTALGIA IN HENRY JAMES'S "THE AMERICAN SCENE"

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Henry James was not a nostalgic writer. Also, he didn't like to confess things. He was rather official, reserved and withdrawn, infinitely penetrating as far as the psychological motives of his characters were concerned but tight-lipped about himself. Throughout much of his career he managed to keep the pose of an impartial spectator and commentator who stands aside and takes notes. As his letters as well as reminiscences of the people who knew him demonstrate, this was not only a pose but a temperamental and even emotional feature. Leon Edel gives us the following sketch of the "Master at sixty" (around 1903): "Distinctly a figure of the elite, his private life unknown, his rare public appearances always portentous and unsmiling, he could be pointed to in the clubs and be sought after by hostesses, and still remain aloof and oracular" (169). This and other descriptions almost always

portray the novelist as an actor of sorts, sporting a theatrical look, extravagant clothes, and a cultivated if conspicuously impersonal code of behaviour.

Yet James seems to have realized there was a price he had to pay for his reserve and reticence. And there is no doubt that in the last ten or fifteen years of his life he became more inward-looking. Sooner or later, the mask had to be dropped. Or at least lowered. And this is what we see when we read his texts after, say, 1903 – a man trying to come to terms with the burden of memories. Some of the most perceptive insights may be found in his late short stories, for example in “The Beast in the Jungle” or “The Jolly Corner,” semi-autobiographical narratives which tell us more about the writer than thousands of his letters or even most observant recollections from those who had met him. Also, and rather surprisingly, the old master turned towards the autobiographical convention, giving us essays and volumes of personal recollections of childhood and youth, particularly in *A Small Boy and Others*, 1913, and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, 1914 (the third autobiographical volume entitled *The Middle Years* was left half-done). It is worth noting as well that his last and unfinished novel, *The Ivory Tower*, contains a number of veiled autobiographical references, its main character a figure of a young American returning to America after many years of absence. The American writer was more and more introspective, apparently despite himself, and the readers of his late texts have the opportunity to catch sight of the man behind the self-imposed pose of an unconcerned writer.

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In this context, it might prove interesting to refer to a much earlier and a rather exceptional entry in his otherwise formal (sometimes tortuously formal) notebooks, the one which shows how great the pressure of the buried emotions and memories was. The fragment, written in January 1879, was prophetic in that it anticipated James’s later attempts to revive his past and integrate it with his present:

Imagine a door – either walled-up, or that has been long locked – at which there is an occasional knocking – a knocking which – as the other side of the door is inaccessible – can only be ghostly. The occupant of the house or room, containing the door, has long been familiar with the sound; and, regarding it as ghostly, has ceased to heed it particularly – as the ghostly presence remains on the other side of the door, and never reveals itself in other ways. But this person may be imagined to have some great and constant trouble; and it may be observed by another person, relating the story, that the knocking increases with each fresh manifestation of the trouble. He breaks open the door and the trouble ceases – as if the spirit had desired to be admitted, that it might interpose, redeem and protect. (James 1987: 10)

The passage is a significant clue to our understanding of how James approached his past. It definitely helps us see why it won’t do to call him a nostalgic writer. The past was for him something more than a memory. It was an existential challenge, an ordeal of the mind, a semi

-private code to be broken. The novelist's later intimations into things remembered and things forgotten yet rememorized can be viewed as serious psychological and emotional interventions.

One of the strongest impulses lying behind James's shift to the autobiographical mode was his journey to the United States, undertaken in August 1904, after a twenty-years absence. The American trip lasted one year (until June 1905) and took James as far as Florida and California, both of great interest to him. His main preoccupation, though, was with the places where he had spent his childhood and youth: New York, Albany, Newport and Boston. In one sense, it might have been a nostalgic and sentimental journey informed by the writer's memories and recollections of people and places – towns and cities rather than natural landscapes as James always preferred the cultivated and the urbane to the wild and the savage. Very quickly, though, romanticism gave way to consternation and alarm at what James saw and felt. The America of 1904 became a locus of the novelist's uneasy dealings with the specters of his own past.

Fortunately, we have a first-rate chronicle of the trip. *The American Scene*, published in 1907 (two years after James's return to England), is a truly fascinating record of his American travels and experiences. It is also an exceptional document with its author trying to surpass the autobiographical mode but ultimately failing to do so. From a purely formal point of view, this collection of fourteen essays is without doubt a crowning achievement of James's travel writings (including similar collections of travel sketches devoted to France, England and Italy). It is witty, responsive, written in the resplendent and somewhat intimidating style typical of the late James. In many respects, it is a book about one person's discovery of the American continent – the novelist had never been to California or the South so in a way he was also discovering the United States for himself. Upon subsequent readings, though, it turns out to be much more than just another brilliant collection of observations and meditations. All in all, *The American Scene* is also an intriguing document of the painstaking process of coming to terms with one's past as well as a treatise on memory and nostalgia as forms of human life. The essays collected in the book tell about remembrance of things past and how it is transformed in the human mind. They demonstrate James's uneasy and complex feelings towards his own personal past, disclosing the tricks played by memory.

Not that the 1904-1905 journey made James a confessional writer. Far from this: he was still inclined to be secretive and evasive. Inevitably, however, confronting numerous scenes of his past made him realize to what extent it influenced and shaped his present self. James wouldn't have been himself if he didn't work out a theory out of this. In a critical commentary to *The Aspern Papers*, written after 1905 and in my opinion discreetly informed by the American journey,

he proposed an interesting notion of the “visitable past.” The idea was illustrated in the following way:

I delight in a palpable imaginable *visitable* past – in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table ... the poetry of the thing outlived and lost and gone, and yet in which the precious element of closeness, telling so of connections but tasting so of differences, remains appreciable. (James 1984: 1177; original italics).

This statement is crucial for our understanding of how James might have perceived his American memories. It points to the past as something which is not very distant and constitutes a part of one’s lifetime. It is detached from the present but at the same time frames and modifies it. Also, it is detached from ourselves – note that according to James you pay a visit to the past rather than relive it – but at the same time it is a part of ourselves. Such a double perspective was important for James because it enabled him both to observe his own past from a distance and find in it an understanding of his own present life.

Incidentally, this may be why at the turn of the century the novelist felt that the “old Europe” no longer provided him with interesting material that could have been artistically capitalized on in his novels and short stories. As a matter of fact, after completing *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* James was perceptibly tired with European themes. In his next novel, *The Ivory Tower*, he wanted to give his readers a broad panorama of American life. The point is he was too familiar with the Old World, and it was getting more and more difficult for him to find a necessary distance which would let him take a position of the indifferent observer of people and situations. This is for instance flatly stated in the essay “Richmond” which opens with a strong statement to the effect that the “European complexity, working clearer to one’s vision, had grown usual and calculable, presenting itself, to the discouragement of wasteful emotion and of ‘intensity’ in general, as the very stuff, the common texture, of the real world” (James 1993: 654). Nothing “could be of a simpler and straighter logic,” adds the American novelist, than the fact that “Europe had been romantic years before, because she was different from America; wherefore America would now be romantic because she was different from Europe” (James 1993: 655).

Unexpectedly, then, it was his native America which by 1904 became for him a relatively distant memory that might be recollected and utilized. The word “relatively” needs to be stressed, though. James’s American past was distant but not distant enough. It was, so to speak, in the middle distance, which meant that it was sufficiently familiar to be personal yet exotic enough to be treated in an artistic fashion. It became a visitable phenomenon, to use James’s own word.

Maybe this was what the novelist hoped it would be. We know that his decision to go to America was neither hasty nor casual. He realized, even if not fully consciously, that this might be a necessary step for him as writer but also as man. Let me repeat: James was not only a sentimental tourist returning to the places of his childhood and youth. He was also determined to go on his way to re-discover his old self and try to integrate it with his present one. No wonder at one moment he calls himself a "revisiting spirit" (James 1993: 428. Note that the adjective "revisiting," like "visitable," has "visit" as its root).

James's plan was founded on certain misapprehensions. For one thing, he certainly underestimated the intensity of his American memories. They were not at all so faded as he believed them to be. In fact, one of the problematic issues that James had to face in the America he visited after twenty years was the surprisingly alarming closeness and familiarity of what he saw there. His favorite stance of a detached and indifferent observer who describes and records his impressions was almost irrelevant and failed him. He hoped that after twenty years America would become an object of observation, something put into perspective and made manageable, and that he might see his native place "with much of the freshness of the eye, outward and inward," as he puts in in a short preface to *The American Scene* (James 1993: 353). In fact, it was the other way round. He was overwhelmed with the past and had to submit to its spectral radiation.

This is conspicuous in the book's opening essays (the ones devoted to New York and New England) in which James, while visiting the places of his childhood and youth, seems to complain that his memories are so strong that he cannot put them in perspective and depict them from the point of view of a distant viewer. Finding himself in Newport, one of the magical places of his teenage years, James noted the "felt condition of having known it too well and loved it too much for description or definition" (James 1993: 528). Similarly in Boston where the writer remarked:

It sometimes uncomfortably happens for a writer, consulting his remembrance, that he remembers too much and finds himself knowing his subject too well; which is but the case of the bottle too full for the wine to start. There has to be room for the air to circulate between one's impressions, between the parts of one's knowledge, since it is the air ... that sets these floating fragments into motion. (James 1993: 541)

Already in these fragments, and they are by no means exceptional, James refers to a sense of pressure he feels when confronted with his past.

The second misunderstanding involved James not taking into account the fact that one's memories are dynamic – they have their own lives and keep on influencing the present. This is especially true of the time of childhood and teenage years which in their intensity shape not only the conscious mind but also the unconsciousness of the human being. James was genuinely

surprised that in America he would have to confront his spectral (repressed or forgotten) ego. A few years later he would describe such an experience in “The Jolly Corner,” generally acknowledged as his masterpiece, a story of a middle-aged man returning to New York after a thirty-years absence and confronting there a spectral presence of the man he would be had he stayed in America:

Rigid and conscious, spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature waited there to measure himself with his power to dismay ... he could gape at his other self in this other anguish, gape as a proof that *he*, standing there for the achieved, the enjoyed, the triumphant life, couldn't be faced in his triumph ... the presence before him was a presence, the horror within him a horror. ... Such an identity fitted his at *no* point, made its alternative monstrous ... the face was the face of a stranger. It came upon him nearer now, quite as one of those expanding fantastic images projected by the magic lantern of childhood; for the stranger, whoever he might be, evil, odious, blatant, vulgar, had advanced as for aggression.” (James 1996: 724-725; original italics)

We can say without exaggeration that going to America became for James a terrifying existential challenge. What he believed was pure nostalgia for his early years turned out to be, as he called it, the “trap to memory.”

This is evident almost everywhere in *The American Scene*. James's first impressions upon arriving at New York after twenty years were permeated with disgust and repulsion. The city, with its newly-erected sky-scrappers (“grossly tall and grossly ugly,” James 1993: 428), is most often referred to by James as hideous. At one moment he describes it as an “enormous system” and a “monstrous organism” with “scattered members” (James 1993: 418). Just a few sentences later he returns to the metaphor, adding the image of the spider-web: “the monster grows and grows, flinging abroad its loose limbs even as some unmannered young giant at his ‘larks,’ and that the binding stitches must for ever fly further and faster and draw harder; the future complexity of the web, all under the sky and over the sea, becoming thus that of some colossal set of clockworks, some steel-souled machine-room of brandished arms and hammering fists and opening and closing jaws” (James 1993: 418). In another essay James laments: “Free existence and good manners, in New York, are too much brought down to a bare rigour of marginal relation to the endless electric coil, the monstrous chain that winds round the general neck and body, the general middle and legs, very much as the boa-constrictor winds round the group of the Laocoon” (James 1993: 429).

Importantly, America became for him a half-legible text, and the process of recognition of remembered places resembled, as he put it, “spelling out of foreign sentences of which one knows but half the words” (James 1993: 357). One of the most frequent phrases used in the essays is that of a meaningless text that has to be interpreted – often James speaks of the

necessity of reading one's meanings into what he thought were blank American landscapes. The American novelist felt almost like a reader in front of an indecipherable message. This was particularly true of New York which filled him with a sense of "individual loneliness" (James 1993: 487). One might add that he was capable of appreciating the variety of the American landscapes, noting their "hundred happy variations" (James 1993: 378). Such stances, though, were rare and immediately followed by objections and personal complaints.

The careful reader of *The American Scene* will quickly discover that James's perceptions of America open themselves to still another dimension. James admits here and there that he feels haunted by his own personal memories, and the vocabulary of ghosts, specters and mysterious presences becomes quite telling. In an important passage he writes:

It is a convenience to be free to confess that the play of perception during those first weeks was quickened, in the oddest way, by the wonderment (which was partly also the amusement) of my finding how many corners of the general, of the local, picture had anciently never been unveiled for me at all, and how many unveiled too briefly and too scantily, with quite insufficient bravery of gesture. That might make one ask by what strange law one had lived in the other time, with gaps, to that number, in one's experience, in one's consciousness, with so many muffled spots in one's general vibration – and the answer indeed to such a question might carry with it an infinite penetration of retrospect, a penetration productive of ghostly echoes as sharp sometimes as aches or pangs. (James 1993: 398-399)

The "ghostly echoes" of remembered places are evidently due to those aspects of the past which are "veiled" and "muffled," that is, displaced from consciousness and either forgotten or repressed. James frequently contrasts the America of 1904 and the America he carries in his memory, witnessing how the former is haunted and overwhelmed by the latter. Applying the metaphor of the traveler-as-reader we can say that what James read into the obscure and blank America he faced in 1904 was often his own repressed past. The results were astounding. Like Spencer Brydon, the protagonist of "The Jolly Corner," James returned to America only to discover his alter ego in the shape of a phantom that symbolizes everything he didn't experience or live through. In *The American Scene*, which is after all not a fictional story but a collection of travel sketches, the repressed memory finds its expression in dense images, convoluted descriptions and the occasionally torturous play of language. The conclusion, however, is similar: the past cannot be dismissed. If ignored, it returns to punish us, turning a strain of nostalgia into the memory's trap.

The ghostly dimension of the past is apparent in the essay "Boston," with the novelist reminiscing the second half of the 1860s when the Jameses moved to Boston's Ashburton Place (James was in his twenties). In his memory the Boston house was a "conscious memento with old secrets to keep and old stories to witness for, a saturation of life as closed together and preserved

in it as the scent lingering in a folded pocket-handkerchief” (James 1993: 543). Now, after forty years, the place was a “gaping void, the brutal effacement, at a stroke, of every related object, of the whole precious past” (James 1993: 543). James speaks of trying to recover “some echo of ghostly footsteps – the sound as of taps on the window-pane heard in the dim dawn” (James 1993: 543) not realizing at first that by introducing the spectral element into his memories he reactivates the nightmare he tries to escape. Infected by nostalgia, the past becomes a detached and self-sufficient entity, a bit like the exotic pagoda approached by Maggie Verver in the fourth book of *The Golden Bowl*, an edifice you cannot enter because in its perfection it seems devoid of doors. In a way, this was what the novelist desired. But did he? After all, such a past becomes inhuman. No wonder the sixty-years-old novelist withdraws from his Ashburton Place memories with a sense of genuine horror: “It was as if the bottom had fallen out of one’s own biography, and one plunged backward into space without meeting anything” (James 1993: 544).

In one of the sketches there is a curious anecdote of the New York Metropolitan Museum which became for James another spectral presence. Opened in 1870, the Museum was first located in Fifth Avenue 681, and then briefly at 128 West 14<sup>th</sup> Street. In 1904 James visited it at its current site, that is, on Fifth Avenue and 82<sup>nd</sup> Street. Nevertheless, he remembered the museum as situated at West 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The memory was so strong that the writer confused the places. As he himself puts it: the “consciousness of the original seat of the Museum, of where and what it had been, was one of those terrible traps to memory, about the town, which baited themselves with the cheese of association, so to speak, in order to exhibit one afterwards as ‘caught,’ or, otherwise expressed, as old; such being the convicted state of the unfortunate who knows the *whole* of so many of his stories” (James 1993: 512). Thus, the New York of 1904 was replaced in James’s mind to the New York of vague and distorted memories, a half-fictional metropolis, a palimpsest city which sunk deep in the novelist’s unconsciousness. What is quite apparent in this experience is a double play of the familiar and the alien, the distant and the near. James himself speaks of the oscillation between possession and dispossession, and he points to a sense of the latter in terms of haunting: “This sense of dispossession ... haunted me so, I was to feel, in the New York streets” (James 1993: 427). This is how nostalgia turns into terror.

This and other examples one can find in *The American Scene* demonstrate that for the novelist the past was not merely the past. For one thing, it was capable of shaping the present, even when it was dismissed, ignored and forgotten. The case of James is interesting as the novelist, at least up to a certain moment, avoided writing *directly* about his past life. He never wrote a diary, and he was rather silent about his childhood and youth, eschewing the subject in his innumerable letters and changing facts in his autobiographical texts. The paradox is that this

made his work even more autobiographical, introspective and past-oriented – only, it did so in a contradictory way, with James apparently denying his past but at the same time, and with the same gesture, reinforcing its significance. As James repressed some of his memories, or at least did not want to have them exposed, they later resurfaced in a deformed and disfigured shape, appearing to the writer as terrifying, dim and ghostly presences. Having said this, we have to add that the novelist's confrontation with his past had a liberating, and even redeeming, value. As in James's prophetic notebook entry that I quoted at the beginning, once you break open the door behind which an alien presence seems to be lurking, the trouble disappears. The writer's American shadowy *Doppelgänger* needed to be released as well. His gaze is felt everywhere in *The American Scene*. After all, though, this is a mild and forgiving gaze.

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#### SUMMARY

##### **Forms of Nostalgia in Henry James's "The American Scene"**

Henry James was not a sentimental writer. However, in his later books we can find traces of repressed emotions and melancholy. One of the most intriguing literary documents showing the nostalgic strain in James is his collection *The American Scene* (1907), a record of the novelist's return to the USA after a twenty-years-old absence. It contains various manifestations of James's nostalgia – for example, his memories of New York and his melancholic recollections of the places connected with his youth. Also, it shows James's convoluted rhetoric of memory as a space of repression and displacement as well as his unwillingness to address these issues in a direct fashion.

## KEYWORDS

Henry James, memory, nostalgia, melancholy

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