

Mirosława Buchholtz
Dorota Gutfeld
Grzegorz Koneczniak
(eds.)

Henry James Goes to War

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Conflicting Identities: The Two Faces of Henry James

Annick Duperray, Aix-Marseille Université

Henry James was “born an American in 1843” and “died a Briton on 27 February 1916,” after 40 years of residence in England. “He had received the honors of King George – the order of merit” – and had been much “appreciated by the French.” The previous announcement could be found in the subtitles of an article published in the *Kansas City Post* on 29 February 1916, and its contents were highly representative of the way the popular press perceived and commented the event. Henry James’s declaration of allegiance to a foreign nation was perceived as a real desertion, as well as the ultimate outcome of a slow process of disengagement from America, motivated by pernicious intellectual habits, notably the author’s well-known cosmopolitanism, elitism and avant-gardism. Curiously enough, the final journey of James’s mortal remains seems to encapsulate both the grandeur and the ironies of his complex fate. Owing to the particular conditions created by the war, Alice, William’s widow, had to smuggle her brother-in-law’s ashes back to America, to bury them in the family plot in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This almost clandestine return, in the teeth of adverse wartime circumstances, was to assume a symbolic dimension, notably among the enlightened New England literary circles. Indeed, as soon as 1 March, the poet and critic William Stanley Braithwaite had devoted a long article in the *Boston Evening Transcript* to Henry James, whom he ranked among the three greatest American authors, along with Hawthorne and Howells. Braithwaite also ran counter to popular opinion concerning James’s oath of allegiance to the British Crown. The writer was no deserter; on the contrary, his naturalization as a British subject represented the spiritual and moral engagement of a genuine American, impatiently desirous of seeing his native country join the European forces allied in the defense of freedom and civilization. If James’s humanist thought gradually evolved into cosmopolitanism, its origins remained highly recognizable, American, even Puritan, Braithwaite insisted, because of the strong ethical stance of an expatriate who could never tolerate any form of compromise.

A double cultural affiliation

On the face of things, James’s involvement in transatlantic relations, both in real life and fiction, was motivated by a persistent idealism, in which he himself recognized the peculiar brand of his native culture. “We’re American born,” he

wrote to his friend Perry as soon as 1867, a few years before his expatriation, and he considered the fact as a real blessing, a source of endless opportunities for a young writer who seemed to associate his literary destinies with the ideal vision of a superior form of cultural harmony based on the “‘synthesis’ of what was best in other forms of civilizations” (James 1999: 48). It is undeniable that such a civilizing aspiration can largely account for the dynamics at the roots of James’s writings. Ethics and aesthetics coalesced in the numerous fictional plots based on the impressions of an American abroad and the merging of cultures went far beyond the Anglophone component. If James was at home in England and still thought of his origins as American, his mental itinerary made of Europe a necessity. His habit of scattering words and quotations in foreign languages – French mainly, but also (though much less frequently) Italian and German – can be considered as a concrete manifestation of this intimate desire to merge with the otherness of European cultures. “Language” is part of the text, and as Edwin Fussell once wrote, “it is no exaggeration to say that readings of James which scant the fact of language are no readings at all” (Fussell 1990: xi). James’s cosmopolitan outlook – “the movement towards the vision of a single many-voiced world-wide humanity” (Fussell 1990: xi) – triggered off an indefatigable quest of meaning under the banner of the cultural historian. This is how the American-born writer and traveler became part of the European cultural heritage, reinterpreting Europe in the second degree.

The dynamics generated by Henry James’s double cultural affiliation were existential as well as literary. In spite of James’s passion, commitment and utter dedication to the cause of literary art, he was no sterile aesthete and did not hesitate to take sides in some rather delicate social, ethical or political issues. For example, in spite of his personal antipathy towards the notorious Oscar Wilde, James was horrified by the “squalid violence” of his first trial in 1895; he personally contacted an influential Member of Parliament and was relieved when he learnt, as he wrote to his friend Daudet, that the prisoner would be allowed to serve out the rest of his time “in relatively easy conditions” (James 1999: 286). In 1896 James was to support the French radical writer Emile Zola in the anti-Semitic Dreyfus case, when Zola was put on trial for libel and condemned. Even if his support was more private than public, as some commentators pinpointed, James was to reiterate his admiration for what he considered as a magnificent example of intellectual integrity and independence of mind, notably in the 1903 essay he devoted to the French writer, whose “courage in the Dreyfus connection, he wrote, testified admirably to his ability to live for himself” (James 1998: 896). When the First World War broke out, the high stature he had acquired allowed him to throw “his moral weight and personal allegiance” (James 1999: 556) in the defense of the British cause and what he considered as a just war. He

became involved in charitable work for Belgian refugees, visiting wounded soldiers – and somehow reenacting, as any reader of the *Autobiography* will notice, a former experience on the other side of the Atlantic, namely his visit to invalid and convalescent troops during the Civil War. As he acutely remembers in the elegiac pages devoted to the episode, this former encounter with the “romantic” figure of the American soldier, “in his depression, his wasted melancholy,” had provided an acute representation of “what was most heroically, most wastefully, tragically, terribly going on.” The episode “had so to serve,” he goes on, “as his particular nearest approach to a ‘contact’ with the active drama,” – a contact without which he would have been left “all but pitifully void of any scrap of a substitute for the concrete experience” (James 1956: 422). The previous statement does give food for thought. Beyond the autobiographical and indirect reference to the “obscure wound” (James 1956: 415) which condemned him to remain a mere spectator during the Civil War, the elegiac tone and the touch of self-irony of those reminiscences call up the writer’s other face, his somber moods, his predilection for “the reverse of the picture” (James 1962: 62).

The “reverse of the picture”

Indeed the author’s sophisticated cosmopolitanism cannot suffice to convey the complexities of both his life and work. The aging writer who accepted the honorary presidency of the American Volunteer Motor-Ambulance Corps was simultaneously working on his autobiography as well as on his last two novels. *The Sense of the Past* and *The Ivory Tower*. The second title speaks for itself and points at the other facet of Henry James’s personality. The expatriate writer was also a staunch bachelor, a solitary self on the verge of solipsism, who had experienced severe depression crises. On the whole, his personality was strong enough to reconcile those antagonistic features. If his solitude was absolute, his social life remained paradoxically intense, as the variations, contradictions and evolution of the international theme will reveal.

If the international motif prevailed during his early period, the author gradually became weary of the cultural confrontation between Europe and America. Indeed James practically abandoned “the great Americano-European legend” during the years he devoted to aesthetic experimentation in connection with the study of the mind at work. The discontents of civilization became his main preoccupation – the predatory instincts of humanity, the manipulation of innocence, the destructive nature of power relations, particularly as they manifested themselves at the microcosmic level of individual experience. In his preface to Volume 14 of the New York Edition of his novels and tales, he declared, concerning his major phase and novels like *The Wings of the Dove* or *The Golden Bowl*:

“the subject could in each case have been perfectly expressed, had all the persons concerned been only American, or only English or only Roman or whatever” (James, *Literary Criticism II*, 1984: 1208).

But a question remains unanswered: why did the Master actually reintroduce the supposedly hackneyed theme of the American observer in his late fiction, even if he seems to minimize its importance? In novels like *The Ambassadors* or the *Wings of the Dove*, the Americanness of the “centre of consciousness” submitted to the painful ordeal of awareness, is particularly obvious. The same goes for late tales, like the “Jolly Corner” (1907) or “A Round of Visits” (1910), in which Europeanized and disenfranchised aesthetes are submitted to complex experiences of both recognition and estrangement, as they (re)discover New York City, their birthplace, in the first years of the twentieth century, after several decades of expatriation.

The return motif and its ambiguities

The answer to our question may be rather simple. In spite of his sophisticated avant-gardism, James may have been actuated, at the end of his career, by an insuperable feeling of nostalgia which is indeed recognizable in the pages of *The American Scene* devoted to his rediscovery of the Edenic autumnal harmony of the New England sceneries during his 1904–1905 trip. Up to a point he undoubtedly was. Similarly, his fictional hero, the Europeanized aesthete Spencer Brydon, experiences a soul-stirring confrontation with the “Jolly Corner,” the sacred place of origins, which he claims as his rightful inheritance after thirty-three years of absence. The return motif underlies James’s prose and generates a cyclic pattern which adds complexity to the theory of a linear progression of his literary corpus towards maturity. Retrospectively, the same motif reinforces the impact of the immature tales of the period of apprenticeship and produces a series of ironic reversals. For example, Searle, the passionate pilgrim and protagonist of the juvenile tale written in 1871, thinks of himself as an exiled prince recovering his lost kingdom, when he discovers Great Britain. At the end of the cycle, the errant heir of “The Jolly Corner” takes the reverse journey. As for the author himself, he was fully aware of his own contradictions, as appears in a letter he wrote to William from Rye, in May 1903, at a moment when he was preparing himself for his long delayed journey to America: “My native land, which time, absence and change have, in a funny sort of way, made almost as romantic to me as ‘Europe’, in dreams or in my earlier time here used to be” (James, *Letters 4*, 1984: 272). Several interpretations can be provided for those ironic counterpoints. One can choose to see them under the romantic light of the enduring

Americano-European legend and conclude, like the French Academician Frederic Brion, that James had converted himself to Europe without “forfeiting his soul” – without abandoning any prospect of return to America, even if the American heritage, sacred as it might appear, could only be restored, conditionally, “under right of inventory” (1960: 12; my translation). Up to a point, the happy ending of “The Jolly Corner” may illustrate the French Academician’s vision: symbolically, Brydon, the rightful heir, ultimately comes into possession of both his native place and the woman who has been waiting for him for so many years. However, the Master himself seemed to consider such a closure as rather fairy-talish, the easy way out. Indeed, a few years after the publication of the tale, in 1914, he wrote preparatory notes for *The Sense of the Past*, in which he explicitly mentioned his intention to reinterpret the outcome of the confrontation between the hero and his *alter ego*, and to foreground the element of “terror” and “dreadfulness” which he had “discounted a bit in the stuff of ‘The Jolly Corner’” (James 1987: 507). As usual with James, both in life and fiction, the real and the romantic are just two sides of the same medal and a striking formulation of this existential double bind can be found in the ironic statement he made in a 1913 letter to Mrs. William James, which contradicts the elegiac declaration of his 1903 letter to William. As he tries to justify his final decision not to settle again in his native land he writes: “Dearest, Alice, I could come back to America (could be carried back on a stretcher) to die – but never, never to live” (James, *Letters 4*, 1984: 658). Furthermore, two years after the publication of “The Jolly Corner” (1908), the last of the 112 tales, “A Round of Visits,” was again devoted to the destructive lures of the New World: the New Yorker Newton Winch, a ruined swindler, will try to recover his freedom and integrity by committing suicide, thus denouncing, so it seems, the moral bankruptcy of a whole civilization. Earlier, with *The American Scene*, the elegiac mood of the pilgrimage had already been counterbalanced by the harsh condemnation of the materialism and greed the author discovered, after almost a quarter-century absence. In the last pages of the book, he had denounced the spoliation of the “great lonely land,” turned into “a vast expanse of level floor,” ready for the “devil’s dance” (James 1984: 736). No wonder the last chapter was omitted from the American edition of the book in 1907.

It is equally arguable that both in fiction and nonfiction, the errant heir that inhabits James’s later prose rejects, after inventory, the symbolic heritage he is entitled to, as if the bitter freedom of the exile was preferable to the threat of compromise. Nevertheless, the conflictual relation to the land of origin remains one of the irreducible complexities of his work. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that one of the most cynical and evil characters in James’s fiction, namely Gilbert Osmond, is described by Touchett as “a vague, unexplained Ameri-

can,” who has been living these thirty years, or less, in Italy. “Why do I call him unexplained?” Ralph goes on; “Only as a cover of my ignorance; I don’t know his antecedents, his family, his origins” (James 1975: 214). The utter rootlessness of the cosmopolite is perceived as uncanny, almost enigmatic, and certainly is an issue to ponder in connection with James’s return to the international theme in his last phase.

The process of interiorization

If James returned to the international structure during his major phase, he also transferred it to another scale and used it as a way of visualizing the confrontation between self and other and the conflicting choices of alternating selves, in the construction of identity. Cultural duality served the function of an objective correlative conveying the relativity, if not the endless reversibility of truth and negating the neoplatonic aspirations of the early Jamesian travellers. No ideal *terra firma* on either side of the Atlantic. But in spite of the highly symbolic dimension of the inner conflicts, it is striking to notice that his questing heroes remained Americans abroad, as if the aging author had not given up “explaining” the American identity, as if this identity could not be apprehended without reconjuring and further negotiating the inassimilable presence of the past in Europe. With his ultimate novel, *The Sense of the Past*, the author had chosen to reinterpret his favorite “Passionate Pilgrim” situation, and imagined a romantic encounter in an empty London house, between “a young American of to-day” and “his relative of upwards of a hundred years ago” (James 1987: 503). The protagonist is a young budding historian whose sense of the past “goes far beyond what historic records could give and this particular sense makes of him the exact counterpart of the 1820 young man, who was of a contemplative turn of mind, just as he himself was, and “whose inward passion had been the sense of the future.” Furthermore, it appears that this ghostly mirror-image had anticipated more or less exactly “the act, or the fact, of the 1910 young man” (James 1987: 506). The thrill of the double-consciousness, “the consciousness of being the other and yet himself also,” imparts such a feeling of self-fulfillment to the hero,” the Master writes, that he first decided, in his November 1914 notes, that the 1810 young man had to be an American too. Modern and contemporary psychoanalytical studies have described the defense mechanism characteristic of people suffering from a “narcissistic personality disorder” (Kohut 1968: 86); its function amounts to the elimination of the tension between actual self and ideal self on the one hand, and ideal self and ideal object on the other. This tension is eliminated by the building up of what O. F. Kernberg analyzed as an “inflated self-concept” (Kernberg 1970: 56), within which the “actual self” and the “ideal

self” – as well as the “ideal object” – are confused.¹ Such an “inflated self-concept” may have presided over the phantasmal scenario of fulfillment James imagined, and the type of consoling self-justification that was accordingly granted to the 1910 young man. It is indeed striking to notice that the “young yearning and budding historian” had been rejected, “galled and humiliated,” by some ‘ideal object’ – namely by a young woman who had refused him “because her heart was set on a man of action and adventure,” but might still be “open to conquest if he succeeded in coming through as great an adventure as any man ever had – or rather much greater” (James 1987: 504). Those elements inevitably remind us of the young writer’s own galling wounds, the inglorious accident which prevented him from taking an active part in the American Civil War, or his beloved cousin’s Minnie’s obvious fascination for the conquering virility of smashing young officers.

The similarities between life and work have always given food for thought to the ‘restless analysts’² of the Master’s prose. Is the authorial figure too conspicuous, does its spectral presence transgress the supposedly inalienable borders of the literary text? Should we interpret James’s work in the light of James’s life? As soon as the early narratives, the heroes’ adventures amount to missed opportunities: broken veterans of the Civil War, solitary bachelors, unsuccessful painters, bewildered transatlantic pilgrims, all the characters suffer from the same kind of affliction, a pervasive incapacity to live, a failure neurosis. Up to a point, the author’s own “obscure hurt” (James 1956: 415) can account for the underlying virility crisis that inhabits his prose. The same goes for the manner in which he seemed to conceive his poetic design as an antidote to the aggressive patriarchal figure of the businessman, which he had promised himself to dodge ever since the beginning of his career, keeping him “indefinitely at bay.” James himself was fully aware of the complex relations between life and work when he enunciated the enigmatic paradox according to which “the artist’s energy fairly depends on his fallibility” – in other words, as psychoanalysis has it, in the way art will sublimate, or deter, symptom. “How much and how often [...] must [an artist] be a dupe,” James pursues, “that of his prime object, to be at all measurably a master,

1 “The tension between actual self on the one hand, and ideal self and ideal object on the other, is eliminated by the building up of an inflated self-concept within which the actual self and the ideal self and ideal object are confused. At the same time, the remnants of the unacceptable images are repressed and projected onto external objects, which are devalued” (Kernberg 1970: 56)

2 This expression is borrowed from Henry James himself in *The American Scene*: “[...] the passion of the restless analyst, on his side, is for the extraction of character.” (See Henry James 1984: 424)

that of his actual substitute for it – or in other words at all appreciably to exist?” (James *Literary Criticism*, 1984: 1295).

Conclusive remarks

“There was something a failure was, a failure in the market, that a success somehow wasn’t” (James 1964: 186). This chiasmic and enigmatic statement was meant to apply to the unfortunate protagonist of one of the artist tales (“The Next Time”), but could be extended to the American “centre of consciousness” specific to the major phase, to all the bruised heroes embodying the other facet of the American identity, the one James was still conjuring up, at the end of his career, as an antidote to the infernal American scene of the robber barons. As the French critic Michel Zeraffa put it, more often than not, James’s exemplary figures were born in the country he himself left and that he himself mistrusted, “as if one had to be American to understand the aesthetic value of Europe,” but also feel how far this value stands from, or even runs counter to, any authentic moral authenticity. “The fluid structures of the society those tormented consciences were born in, clash with the stable cultural patterns of Europe, that have the force of law” (Zeraffa 1978: 56; my translation). Along the same line of thought, Denis Donoghue recognizes one of the essential features of the American idiom in James’s prose, the paradoxical dynamics of a literary tradition thriving upon the conditions of failure, – a tradition “that would lose its soul,” were it given the conditions of success: “If there is now a tradition of American literature, it starts from penury of circumstance and achieves, at enormous personal cost, a style never secure in the possession of itself, but always pursuing its own best self” (Donoghue 1974: 432). The “madness of art”³ for whose sake most of James’s heroes live and die, can illustrate this theory and for Dennis Donoghue James has been unduly Europeanized, but one can also argue that if his “desperate metaphysics” are characteristic of American literature, they also coincide with the early modernist European existential theories. In spite of difficulties and misunderstandings, the Master’s double cultural belonging facilitated access to the essential freedom that accounts for the perennity and universality of his ‘life after death.’

3 See Henry James, “The Middle Years” in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, Vol. IX, 1964, 75: “We work in the dark, we do what we can, and the rest is the madness of art.”