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Developing a Civilized Perspective: Transatlantic Travellers in the Early Short Fiction of Henry James

Aurélie Guillain

- 1 In the context of Henry James's short fiction, the transatlantic journey is part of the author's defence and illustration of the cosmopolitan perspective, the particular vantage point which James defined as a highly civilized one and which he made the centre of his literary aesthetics as well as that of his personal *ethos*. Raised by an eccentric father as a transatlantic traveller, Henry James Junior willingly appropriated this aspect of the paternal legacy. When he referred to the decision which he made, in December 1876, to settle in London, James even characterized that choice as a vital move toward self-definition:

My choice is the old world—my choice, my need, my life. There is no need for me today to argue about this; it is an inestimable blessing to me, and a rare good fortune, that the problem was settled long ago, and that I have now nothing to do but act on the settlement. (*A Journal*, Entry: Nov 25th, 1881)

- 2 In 1915 James even became a British citizen, thus showing his loyalty to a nation at war and also consolidating the finality of his early decision to remain in Europe. During his lifetime, he often visited the United States but only did so for relatively short periods. Such stays would fuel the writing of both essays and fictional works: for instance, James' 1904 visit to the United States led to the writing of the autobiographical essay "The American Scene" (1907) but also to short stories such as "The Jolly Corner" (1908), which precisely dealt with the motif of the belated visit to America. In these literary reconstructions, the reflector is some Europeanized American who regards the American scene with a considerable degree of ambivalence: this visitor praises the social equality which was comparatively greater in the United States than in Britain, but the visitor also greatly suffers from the cultural homogeneity of an American scene which he perceives as an *aesthetic* nightmare, especially for a fiction writer in quest of an interesting subject. In fact, in this visitor's eyes the laudable social homogeneity of the United States cannot

be dissociated from the appalling cultural homogeneity of the country: this lack of social and cultural variety is often characterized in pictorial or photographic terms, as unrelieved *blankness*, as if the American scene presented the painful sight of some homogeneous surface, devoid of any secret depths and in which nothing seems either noticeable or memorable: hence James's famous characterization of Hawthorne¹ as a kindred literary spirit who could not stand the bare, blank, unfurnished quality of the contemporary American scene and who, like James, had to look for stimulating subject-matter either in the American past or in Europe itself.

- 3 In "The Jolly Corner," the dullness of the recovered American scene intensifies into melodramatic horror when Brydon, the Europeanized visitor, encounters a ghostly American double of himself. This double gives him a horrifyingly vivid idea of what he himself might have become, had he remained in America.² Now, this all-American ghost appears to be a mutilated being, for "one of his hands had lost two fingers, which were reduced to stumps, as if accidentally shot away" (225). Brydon's spectral encounter with his double should not be interpreted as guilt-ridden: quite to the contrary, the spectre is part of a self-justifying script. Indeed, the choice made by Brydon—the cosmopolitan choice, the choice not to remain in America—seems fully justified by the encounter with a double whose mutilated hands are symbols of moral and literary impotence. Brydon is both an American and a European, but his cultural hybridity does not appear in any way monstrous; on the contrary, it is the pure and simple American citizen who is made to appear monstrous, not through conspicuous excess but through spectacular *lack*: when the ghostly double appears, his face is concealed by his hands so that the absence of two fingers becomes the man's only conspicuous feature. Clearly, the dramatic encounter with the ghost is the pivotal moment when the whole existence of the Europeanized visitor becomes justified. With hindsight, the cosmopolite is proved right. The monstrosity of literary impotence and the sterility of an existence that has been wholly devoted to economic matters are precisely the horrors which Brydon, the Europeanized American, has been spared. More generally, in many other texts by James, it can be argued that the author is *justifying*, in one way or other, his decision to have settled in Europe, as he does for instance in the following passage from a travel writing piece, "Occasional Paris" (1877), published in *Portraits of Places* in 1883:

There comes a time when one set of customs, wherever it may be found, grows to seem to you as provincial as another; and then I suppose it may be said of you that you have become a cosmopolite. You have formed the habit of comparing, of looking for points of difference and of resemblance, for present and absent advantages, for the virtues that go with certain defects, and the defects that go with certain virtues. If this is poor work compared with the active practice, in the sphere to which a discriminating Providence has assigned you, of the duties of a tax-payer, an elector, a juryman or a diner-out, there is nevertheless something to be said for it. It is good to think well of mankind, and this, on the whole, a cosmopolite does .
(496)

- 4 In this article, I would like to focus on some early developments of the Jamesian praise of the cosmopolitan perspective. By a close examination of three early short stories, "A Passionate Pilgrim" (1871), "Daisy Miller: A Study" (1878) and "The Modern Warning" (1888), I wish to examine the *criteria* by which the cosmopolitan perspective is presented as supremely "civilized." In these three short stories, the narrators or the focal characters are Europeanized Americans who scrutinize the behaviour of some other Americans who are "more freshly disembarked" in Europe than themselves. I would like to argue that the cosmopolite's tendency to suspend his judgement is what makes his position a better, and

possibly the best, vantage-point from which to sketch out truly interesting epistemological problems: in the case of James, these are aporias, epistemological dead-ends. We shall also see how in these early short stories, the cosmopolitan mind is made the centre of an ironic textual strategy: the cosmopolite sees through the illusions of freshly disembarked Americans who are faced with otherness but fail to see the Other, inasmuch as they only perceive the European scene through the haze of their own narcissistic projections. The cosmopolite is thus used as an expert commentator in the field of narcissistic fantasies but also is one who knows how impossible it is generally to disentangle perception from imagination, or to make out the data of European experience from the pre-existing fabric of American scripts. I would argue that these early short stories delineate the defining features of a highly civilized kind of text: one that conveys the awareness of perceiving the European scene through the scripts of American fantasies.

- 5 In “The Modern Warning” (1888), a heterodiegetic narrator follows the fate of an American girl who has been touring Europe with her mother and has conveniently met an English Lord, whom she is planning to marry. The hostility of a morbidly jealous brother, who loves his sister to the point of wishing that she will never marry, is quite palpable in the scene staging the encounter between the two men and reinforces the narrator’s emphasis on the many cultural differences between them. The narrator treats the scene in the tone of a light comedy of manners, playing with stereotypes regarding the American middle class and the English nobility that were widespread in the second half of the nineteenth century:

This contrast was extreme and complete, and it was not weakened by the fact that both the men had the signs of character and ability. The American was thin, dry, fine, with something in his face which seemed to say that there was more in him of the spirit than of the letter. He looked unfinished and yet somehow he looked mature, though he was not advanced in life. The Englishman had more detail about him, something stippled and retouched, an air of having been more artfully fashioned, in conformity with traditions and models. He wore old clothes which looked new, while his transatlantic brother wore new clothes which looked old. He thought he had never heard the American tone so marked as on the lips of Mr Macarthy Grice, who on his side found in the accent of his sister’s friend a strange, exaggerated, even affected variation of the tongue in which he supposed himself to have been brought up. In general he was much irritated by the tricks which the English played with the English language, deprecating especially their use of familiar slang. (23-24)

- 6 The contrast between the two men is indeed “extreme and complete” (23), for the passage is wholly built on antithesis. The American man is associated with Puritanical culture and its concern with the spirit of law: “there was more in him of the spirit than of the letter” (23). By contrast the Englishman is associated with a Protestant culture still contaminated by Catholicism in its persisting concern for external forms and proprieties: “an air of having been more artfully fashioned, in conformity with traditions and model” (24). The antithesis is also brought to bear on their linguistic differences: the English Lord is fond of using slang and this is categorized as a “trick.” Indeed, these are the kind of tricks which one plays with formal linguistic expression when one is perfectly confident that he cannot be suspected of usurping his eminent social position. The English lord’s use of slang thus makes him out as a member of a social class whose privileges have been inherited, as opposed to the American man who stands for a more equalitarian society. The antithesis is also built in reference to a pictorial diptych, the juxtaposition of two

paintings showing different degrees of finish. When the narrator states that the American “looked unfinished and yet somehow [...] looked mature, though he was not advanced in life” (23-24) the pictorial connotations of “unfinished” are matched by the connotations of “stippled” and “retouched” in depiction of the Englishman. The contrast between the two national types is thus articulated with a contrast between two pictorial styles: the treatment of the Englishman’s portrait recalls the classic treatment of a likeness, with many details and in conformity with traditions and models. By contrast, the portrait of the American suggests lighter and broader brush-strokes, less detail and vaguer contours, in keeping with contemporary nineteenth century pictorial experiments. This contrast between pictorial styles draws the reader’s attention to the different writing styles used about the men by this particular narrator. In the succession of adjectives used about the American (“thin, dry, fine”), the description shifts from physical appearance (“thin”) to moral and psychological features (“dry,” “fine”), but also from relative precision to increasing polysemy: the term “dry,” used in reference to a human being, can only refer, as in a transferred epithet, to the man’s “dry humour” or to his “dry remarks” and is therefore a relatively unambiguous term, but the adjective “fine” is extremely polysemous. Such delineation is typical of James’s tendency to portray Americans as “vague” and “incompletely defined,” as lacking “finish,” the vagueness of the description mimicking, as it were, the very vagueness of the American character. This is an important defect which comes as the counterpart of an important virtue in James’s writing: indeed, the American individual is associated with the possibility of defining himself or herself with a certain amount of individual independence. The Jamesian narrator is thus endorsing the national mythology of the second chance as well as the exceptionalist vision of an American Adam, but he is simultaneously putting this mythology into ironic perspective by presenting the American Adam as suffering from a lack of “finish,” the very defect that springs from the central American virtue.

- 7 As we can see, in “The Modern Warning” the narrator gives an extremely balanced appreciation of national differences. His cosmopolitan perspective is euphemistic and very far from being harshly judgemental in either part of the diptych. Indeed, the cosmopolitan narrator does not have to choose between England and America, contrary to the young American woman who is the protagonist of the tale, torn between her allegiance to a jealous American brother and her equally strong allegiance to an English husband. The dilemma of the young woman ends in suicide. The cosmopolitan narrator is spared precisely this kind of dilemma: having to choose, having to declare some distinct preference for one nation as opposed to the other. This narrator speaks in a conspicuously neutral way, in a voice which can no longer be placed, no longer be categorized as sounding either English or American—which was one of James’s explicitly stated ambitions. In an October 29, 1888 letter to his brother William, James writes:

(...) I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am, at a given moment, an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as I do with both countries), as so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized. (*Letters*, 244)

- 8 Not being harshly judgemental on the question of national customs is a pitfall that James would self-consciously avoid, aware as he was of having two reading publics on both sides of the Atlantic, especially for his short stories that were often almost simultaneously published in London and New York reviews. Yet James’s wish not to sound too harsh on either Americans or Englishmen ran much deeper than the unwillingness to alienate one

portion of his reading public. Indeed, James was deeply interested in the definition of moral evil. In this respect, the cosmopolitan narrator or the cosmopolitan reflector could be used as the ideally discriminating minds that are able to isolate genuine moral evil, usually defined in Kantian terms as the treatment of the other human subject as a means and not an end in himself. In “The Modern Warning” for instance, mere national defects are finely discriminated from the moral fault proper; in this case the fault is finely isolated as the moral *desiccation* of the “thin, dry, fine” American brother whose love for his sister is tinged with incestuous jealousy and tyrannical self-love.³ In this sense the cosmopolite becomes the ideal reflector because he is culturally equipped, by his comparative approach to national customs, to discriminate between genuine moral evil and the kind of national defects that only happen to come with certain national virtues.

- 9 Thus the cosmopolite seems the ideal reflector because of his particular *knowledge* of national customs and defects, but we should immediately add that on many occasions, the cosmopolite is also valuable to the author because of his particular *deficiencies*. Indeed the cosmopolite is easily lost and often puzzled by his own observations: he is thus the best kind of reflector in narratives revolving around epistemological puzzles. The cosmopolite knows how and when it is fitting to suspend one’s judgement. For instance, in “Daisy Miller: A Study” (1878), the reflector is Winterbourne, a young American who has lived for so long in Switzerland that he calls himself one of the “Europeanized Americans” living in Geneva. There Winterbourne meets a freshly disembarked American girl, Daisy Miller, who puzzles him by her outspoken manner and independent spirit:

‘I have always had,’ she said, ‘a good deal of gentlemen’s society.’

Poor Winterbourne was amused, perplexed, and decidedly charmed. He had never yet heard a young girl express herself in just this fashion; never, at least, save in cases where to say such things seems a kind of demonstrative evidence of a certain laxity of deportment. And yet was he to accuse Miss Daisy Miller of actual or potential *inconduite*, as they said at Geneva? He felt that he had lived at Geneva so long that he had lost a good deal; he had become dishabituated to the American tone. Never, indeed, since he had grown old enough to appreciate things, had he encountered a young American girl of so pronounced a type as this. Certainly she was very charming but how deucedly sociable! Was she simply a pretty girl from New York State—were they all like that, the pretty girls who had a good deal of gentlemen’s society? Or was she also a designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person? Winterbourne had lost his instinct in this matter, and his reason could not help him. (150-151)

- 10 The sketchy figure of Winterbourne in “Daisy Miller” prefigures the character of Ralph Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) by the sublimated quality of his fascination for the striking American girl: Winterbourne is not charmed so much by the girl’s physical presence as by the presence of an *image* which is made alluring by its ambiguity. In the characterization of Winterbourne’s perplexity — “Poor Winterbourne was amused, perplexed, and decidedly charmed” (150) — the ternary rhythm of the sentence enhances the amplification of one idea: “amused,” “perplexed” and “charmed” all refer to the specific pleasures provided by ambiguous situations. In this case Winterbourne is not able to categorize Daisy either as an innocent girl or as a morally corrupt, scheming young woman. And this time, it is in an incapacity that the cosmopolite’s capacity lies. The text implies that any American living in the United States could judge Daisy Miller and pass a moral judgment on her; it also implies that any European would pass such a judgment without hesitation. By contrast, the civilized cosmopolitan mind of Winterbourne is neither American nor European and is made refined by the incapacitation of his judging

faculties: he has “lost his instinct in this matter” and cannot judge this particular girl, either in the moral sense or in the epistemic sense of making an inductive guess: he cannot categorize this particular case by referring it back to a general type. In this respect, it seems that the cosmopolitan mind is thus isolated as the privileged vantage-point from which the Jamesian story can be written: not because of the superior capacities of the cosmopolite’s mind, but on the contrary, because of the cosmopolite’s impaired faculties. Daisy Miller is above all a puzzle (and in this respect she strongly differs from Isabel Archer, who is not only a puzzle to others but also a puzzled mind, a complex and changing novelistic reflector). Daisy Miller is the little sister of the many Jamesian figures whose innocence or corruption is meant to remain an unsettled question throughout the narrative, because the very point of such stories is precisely—and perhaps exclusively—to lay bare some epistemological dead-end about some ethical matter, leading the puzzled observer to go through a quasi-aesthetic experience in the Kantian sense: in the course of experience the subject can sense the play of his own faculties while these faculties are at work. As Evelyne Labbé put it in her introduction to the text, “Daisy Miller” prefigures the tension between textual ambiguity and hermeneutic obsession which is found in James’s major texts.⁴

- 11 Thus, the Europeanized American is made a precious reflector because of his awareness of his own limitations. Because he is also supremely aware of the limitations of the vision of other Americans, he is also an ideal *iron*, the intradiegetic double of the ironic author. Indeed the Europeanized American is often used as the critical eye observing the freshly disembarked Americans who are faced with otherness and yet fail to see it, being blinded as they are by their own narcissistic projections. Commenting on the use which is made of the European scene by the early James, Evelyne Labbé notes that before the early 1880s, James often used Europe as a mere theatrical backdrop where narcissistic fantasies are played out.⁵ And indeed, in James’s early short fiction, the international theme was often used in an ironic way, to stage the love of the same and the fascination for the image of the self. I would add that the Europeanized American enjoys the best possible vantage point to expose the fantastical illusions of the freshly disembarked American who is convinced that he is facing geographical, cultural, political otherness while in actual fact he is merely dealing with sameness and is fully engrossed in his own narcissistic fantasies.
- 12 “A Passionate Pilgrim” (1871) is a case in point. In this short story the cosmopolite is an anonymous American narrator, who briefly characterizes himself as someone who has spent a great amount of time in Europe. This narrator strikes up a friendship with Clement Searle, a freshly disembarked American man, a bankrupt and afflicted soul in search of a second chance: Searle has indeed come to Europe acting upon the false hope that he might come into the legacy of an English country house which used to belong to an ancestor of his. Searle is the epitome of the “amateur.” He is the eponymous “passionate pilgrim” who believes that he is about to come into his European legacy and to appropriate all things European, on a literal and metaphorical level. Searle dreams of absolute self-loss, perfect cultural assimilation with the old world, the other world. The narrator feels embarrassed and awkward in the face of his friend’s occasional fits of delirium but regards his companion with immense compassion and curiosity. The following passage deals with one such awkward and poetic occasion. In the scene, the actual owner of the English country house tells a local tale about a ghost who is said to haunt the house, the ghost of a woman whom the ancestor of Searle has deserted. Searle,

the passionate pilgrim, responds with inadequate passion to this simple piece of English storytelling, revealing his dream of absolute assimilation with his English ancestor and namesake:

“She was a poor curate’s daughter of Hereford. Clement Searle had loved her—loved her all too well. She had been turned out in wrath from her father’s house; his mother at least might pity her; if not for herself, then for the child she was soon to bring forth. The poor girl had been a second time too trustful. The women, in scorn, in horror, with blows possibly, turned her forth again into the storm. In the storm she wandered and in the deep snow she died. Her lover, as you know, perished in that hard winter weather at sea; the news came to his mother late, but soon enough. We are haunted by the curate’s daughter!”

There was a pause of some moments. “Ah, well we may be!” said Miss Searle, with a great pity.

Searle blazed up into enthusiasm. “Of course you know,”— and suddenly he began to blush violently —“I should be sorry to claim any identity with my faithless namesake, poor fellow. But I shall be hugely tickled if this poor ghost should be deceived by my resemblance and mistake me for her cruel lover. She’s welcome to the comfort of it. What one can do in the case I shall be glad to do. But can a ghost haunt a ghost? I *am* a ghost!” (272)

13 The “passion” of the passionate pilgrim consists in believing that he might coincide with his ancestor, his imaginary double. The boundary between the perceiving subject and the imagined self-image is dissolving, a disintegration which is ironically enhanced by Searle’s complaining that he has already become a “ghost” and is too ghostly to be lovingly haunted by another ghost. The narrator is being simultaneously ironic and sympathetic in his portrayal of the raving pilgrim for whom the ontological boundary between fiction and the real has utterly dissolved. Indeed our Europeanized American is both drawn to the passionate fantasy of perfect assimilation and simultaneously repelled by it.

14 Especially in the narrator’s landscape descriptions, the passionate fantasy of perfect coincidence with, and dissolution into, European culture is clearly active but is also presented in a critical light. In the following extract, it is the narrator’s text that can be called a highly “civilized” one in that it lays bare the shaping influence of American scripts and central American fantasies in its description of European otherness:

Close beside it, I admit, the railway shoots fiercely from its tunnel in the hills; yet there broods upon this charming hamlet an old-time quietude and privacy, which seems to make a violation of confidence to tell its name so far away. We struck through a narrow lane, a green lane, dim with its barriers of hawthorn; it led us to a superb old farmhouse, now jostled by the multiplied roads and by-ways that have curtailed its ancient appanage. It stands there in stubborn picturesqueness [...]. It is cruelly complete; its bended beams and joists, beneath the burden of gables, seem to ache and groan with memories and regrets. The short low windows, where lead and glass combine in equal proportion to hint to the wondering stranger of the medieval gloom within, still prefer their darksome office to the grace of modern day. Such an old house fills an American with an indefinable feeling of respect. (“A Passionate Pilgrim” 250-251)

15 Some descriptive elements connote pure European otherness as opposed to American-ness: the “old-time quietude and privacy” and the “narrow lane” suggest the private, separate, almost sacred quality of an English sanctuary that ought to be protected from the curiosity of other American tourists: “[it] seems to make a violation of confidence to tell its name so far away.” The epithet “superb” denotes architectural elegance but also aristocratic pride, in keeping with the vision of a European society still plagued by social

inequalities inherited from feudal times. The mention of the “medieval gloom” reigning inside the farm-house and the quaint reference to its curtailed “appanage” consolidate the feudal imagery⁶ and stress the distinctly European quality of the setting. The house is eventually personified as an old creature labouring “beneath the burden of gables, seem [ing] to ache and groan with memories and regrets” so that the house becomes the visible embodiment, in the present day, of the European feudal past. And yet, this text is also interspersed with elements grudgingly admitting that this medieval European space is, like the American continent, a garden which the modern machine has already violated: “I admit, the railway shoots fiercely from its tunnel in the hills.” The primitive European sanctuary has shrunk because of increased traffic, a metonymy of modern economic activity: “now jostled by the multiplied roads and by-ways that have curtailed its ancient appanage” (250). The reference to the “picturesque” (250) quality of the place confirms the reader’s impression that this is a fabricated image of European otherness which the narrative is simultaneously proposing and deconstructing. The deconstruction is all the more effective as the passage is studded with intertextual puns on *The House of the Seven Gables* by Nathaniel Hawthorne: a barrier of “hawthorn” leads the visitors toward the house, whose “gables” bear the burden of a cultural heritage which also points to a literary legacy: indeed, if a literal hedge of hawthorn guides the visitor toward an English farmhouse, the signifier “hawthorn” also guides the reader toward an American narrative and the symbolic use of space which is made in that work of fiction. In this sense I would argue that a “highly civilized” kind of text is thus written from the point of the view of the cosmopolite: this is a text displaying its awareness of not being a *direct* vision of Europe, but one that is mediated by pre-existing American scripts.

- 16 As we have seen, in these early short stories James was already praising the cosmopolitan frame of mind as the centre of a literary aesthetics, as well as the centre of a personal *ethos*: the habit of wisely suspending one’s judgment, the tendency to be puzzled and relish epistemological dead-ends as well as the capacity to perceive the work of one’s own imagination in one’s perceptions, are all psychological dispositions which James associated with the cosmopolitan mind and which he gradually converted into the principles of a literary vision.

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NOTES

1. In his 1879 essay entitled *Hawthorne*.
2. For a study of the "other" in this story, see Claude Forray's article entitled "Foreignness and the Alter Ego in Henry James's 'The Jolly Corner'", *JSE* 29 (Autumn 1997), Special Issue on "Other Places, Other Selves."
3. Emphasis mine.
4. "[une] dynamique [qui] tient à l'obsession de réduire à l'univocité, par un effort constant d'interprétation, les ambiguïtés savamment entretenues par le texte" (1346).
5. "cet 'ailleurs' géographique en trompe-l'oeil où le personnage jamesien, américain le plus souvent, ne fait qu'aller à la rencontre d'un destin inscrit dès l'origine au plus profond de son désir inconscient" (xxxviii).
6. The term "appanage" originally referred to the lands given as compensation to the younger brothers of the ruling king.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article s'attache à étudier l'élaboration d'une apologie du cosmopolitisme dans les nouvelles de Henry James, notamment à travers l'étude de trois nouvelles publiées relativement tôt dans sa carrière : « A Passionate Pilgrim » (1871), « Daisy Miller: A Study » (1878) et « The Modern Warning » (1888). Dans ces trois nouvelles, le voyageur transatlantique apparaît sous deux espèces : celle du cosmopolite proprement dit, dépeint sous les traits de l'Américain européanisé, et celle du voyageur américain "débarqué de plus fraîche date". Le cosmopolite apparaît ici comme le porteur d'une acuité de perception mais aussi d'une capacité d'abandon à la perplexité qui sont présentées comme l'apanage d'une perspective particulièrement civilisée. Nous souhaiterions montrer comment ce réflecteur, qui est choisi pour sa propension à suspendre son jugement tout autant que pour sa lucidité ironique, participe d'une défense et illustration d'une perspective cosmopolite, cette perspective étant articulée non seulement à un habitus social mais aussi à un type d'écriture bien spécifique.

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