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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

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Henry James's first book of travel writings, *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875), was published in the same year as his first collection of stories, *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales*, and the serialization of *Roderick Hudson*. *The American Scene* (1907) and several of the essays included in *Italian Hours* (1909) belong to late James, written after the novelist had achieved what most critics consider to be his finest aesthetic achievements, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. Between the publication of these volumes other collections of travel writings appeared: *Foreign Parts* (1883), *Portraits of Places* (1883), *A Little Tour in France* (1884), and *English Hours* (1905), all comprised of sketches and essays initially offered to periodicals in the United States and England over four decades of the author's writing life.

The American Scene is the only of these publications to have been conceived from the outset as a book, and of all of James's travel literature has received by far the most critical attention. Since the advent in the 1980s of cultural studies and the "new" historicism, *The American Scene* has acquired a central position in James's oeuvre and accumulated a distinguished history of commentary. It would nowadays be considered eccentric to rate certain of the earlier novels, like *Roderick Hudson* or *The American* for instance, over this late masterpiece that blends autobiographical insight with social and cultural observations of the author's native land. The change in critical temper that saw formalist approaches to literature move back-stage as cultural interests came to predominate in academic studies of James only partly explains this recent ascendance of *The American Scene*. The growing interest in James's work from pragmatist perspectives, the revival of scholarship dealing with autobiography defined as a literary genre in its own right, and other challenges to the monumental status of the novel as a privileged mode of aesthetic discourse are also partly responsible no doubt for this ascendance. Still, our age is by common consensus an age of cultural studies, and the shift of focus away from formal values in aesthetic discourse towards referential values of a social, political and historical nature has been distinctly reflected over the years in the critical reception of James's writing and of his most famous travel narrative in particular. In some ways this is paradoxical, since *The American*

Scene is far from being the least formally and rhetorically complex of James's works. Much criticism, especially the most recent, is aware of this paradox, and has been attempting to come to terms with the work's socio-cultural and political import by inventing ever more sophisticated and nuanced theoretical means for dealing with the highly aesthetic nature of the mediating discourse. This tension between the cultural and the aesthetic, the historical and the literary, is finally what makes a text like *The American Scene* the promising enigma that it is for so many critical readers of James. These same tensions are at work in the essays and sketches dealing with the author's English and Continental travels, broadening the complexity of key critical issues and in some ways deepening them.

The aim of this volume devoted to James's travel writings is double, as it consists both in pursuing the study of tensions and conflicts that recent criticism has explored in discussions of *The American Scene* and in inscribing these tensions within the larger context of the author's travel literature as a whole, the reception of which has been overshadowed by that of the late masterpiece. One obvious advantage of this effort is that it brings the genre of travel writing itself to the foreground in a way that independent treatment of *The American Scene* often does not, reminding readers of the existence of a writing practice which throughout the author's life played a crucial role in the development of his cultural and aesthetic interests. Another is that it gives a completer picture of a traveller who, as an American in Europe and a Europeanized American in America, was a foreigner everywhere, with crucial differences of course, which can be of considerable hermeneutical and imaginative interest to the reader. For instance, one grasps more fully the nature of James's dependence on personal memory in *The American Scene* if one has encountered the full play of the historical imagination to which he abandons himself with such speculative insistence in his travels in England, Italy, and France. Study of his interest in ethnic difference in the lower East Side of New York, for example, might profit considerably by comparison with his fascination with ethnic identity in southern Italy. Impressions of Europe and of America often appear in the travel literature as two sides of the same aesthetic coin, so to speak, making an understanding of James's encounters with the Old World prerequisite to a full understanding of the complex political, sociological and cultural attitudes he displays in his late return to the New World. Read in its entirety, what the travel literature also reveals is that James's perceptions as a traveller are structured at least as much by the temporal circumstances of their occurrence as by spatial and geographical considerations, since the young man touring Rome and aspiring to be an artist can scarcely be said to possess the same aesthetic instincts and faculty for vision as the successful novelist returned home and looking back at his origins with the acquired insight of long experience spent abroad. Knowledge of the full range of teleological perspectives, from that of the forward-looking young American abroad to the backward-looking Europeanized American in his native land, enhances the reader's interpretive capacity confronted with any one of these outlooks as it is encountered in the travelogues, not to mention the ways various perspectives first worked out in the recorded travel impressions are later reflected, as is so often the case, in the

stories and novels. James's travel writings were in many ways a laboratory of literary experimentation. Our acquaintance with them deepens our responsive capacity to the author's other literary works, not only because travel and the cosmopolitan awareness it implies are central to James's aesthetic and moral consciousness, but because the ways perception is dramatized in these writings offer considerable insight into the formal processes of the fiction. For these and other reasons, a few of which will be alluded to below, it is somewhat surprising that over a hundred years after the author's death no comprehensive study of James's travel writings as a genre has been undertaken.¹ This collection cannot by itself redress that omission, of course, but it does set forth some of the stakes involved in these works when studied together as part of a specific writing practice both important in its own right and crucial to the author's literary experience and production.

Parables of perception: the title is intended to evoke the figural dimension of Jamesian vision, hinting at the Pauline parable that the author himself parodies in a well-known early letter to Thomas Sargeant Perry.² From *Transatlantic Sketches* to *Italian Hours*, from *Portraits of Places* to *The American Scene*, the act of perception is foregrounded in ways that differ significantly from the author's fiction but are no less problematic in their complex staging of appearances. In the contributions collected here a consensus emerges, with various degrees of emphasis and based on divergent epistemological assumptions, that James's travel memoirs should not be read as being less figural or less parabolic in nature than the author's fiction, but rather as a body of writing whose referential power, intensified sometimes to the extreme, draws upon the same resources as the fiction and finds there the very possibility of thinking the act of perception itself. To think the act of perception—to liberate from it a critical force and a demystifying power in a world observed as increasingly subject to aesthetic ideology and mass spectacle, what James called the "technical imagination" and the organizational "genius" of the "hotel-world" in *The American Scene* (79-82)—, this often appears to be the author's intention in these writings, especially the later works, where confrontation with the effects of capitalist and technological modernity is unavoidable. Whether intentional or simply the effect of the author's extraordinary epistemological rigor, the critical import and potential of *The American Scene* has

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1. In a sign that this may be changing, this *Viatica* publication appears shortly after the release of a book edited by Mirosława Buchholtz devoted to the subject of travel in James, although it is not devoted exclusively to the genre of travel writing: *Henry James' Travel: Fiction and Non-Fiction*, New York: Routledge, 2018.
 2. In his letter to T.S. Perry of November 1, 1863, James, who was only twenty years old at the time, argues at length in sceptical fashion against his friend's enthusiasm for Locke's criticism and ends by soliciting the Pauline parable as a means of ironizing on the possibility of so-called "unprejudiced" vision: "As long as we squint at the truth instead of looking straight at it—i.e. as long as we are prejudiced instead of fair, so long we are miserable sinners. But it seems to me that this fatal obliquity of vision inheres not wholly in any individual but in some indefinable property in the social atmosphere. --When by some concerted effort of humanity the air is purified then the film will fall from our eyes and (to conclude gracefully) we shall gaze undazzled at the sun!!!! How I *do* run on!" (James, 1975 47)

been recognized by commentators as diverse in their approaches to the work as Ross Posnock and Sara Blair, Sharon Cameron and Gert Buelens, to mention a few of the more influential voices of the last thirty years. Many of the articles collected here explicitly engage the tradition of critical reception, whether it be by building upon previous approaches or by taking critical distance from them. Others have introduced new approaches or come from fields of study, like ecocriticism, that have only recently turned their attention to James. Our title can therefore be said to apply to the articles collected here as well as to James's texts that are under study. Each is a theoretical fiction which stages in its own way the traveller's acts of perception—including perceptions of selfhood and of national, racial, and cultural identity—and the writing of them. Suffice it to say that since for James being is ultimately defined as appearance, and since its intelligibility is never, in the end, a confrontation with the ideal character of a "thing in itself," but rather a specular, enigmatic form of seeing "through a glass darkly," perception is never a neutral act. Whatever the social, cultural, historical or political horizon it is situated in, perception in James is always enigmatically staged as grounded in language, a parable, fiction or fable, of perception which the eleven articles collected here have endeavoured in various ways to consider as such.

It goes without saying that interpretive conflicts as well as consensus emerge from a collection like this, and no effort will be made in this introduction to elucidate them, leaving it to the reader to draw her or his own conclusions regarding the diversity of readings gathered here.

Cornelius Crowley begins the collection by situating travel at the heart of James's aesthetic and by treating it less as a mere attribute or accident of James's personal life than as a modality of being itself. Starting out from the 1872 essay "A European Summer: From Chambery to Milan," the author posits a mode of perception in James which distinguishes itself both from Protestant rational scepticism, typical of the American traveller, and from French Symbolism with its absolutist tendencies. James is interpreted here as working out a more sinuous ethos of vision, steering clear of the sublime on one hand and of objectifying depreciation on the other, an ethos which consists of affirming a radical contingency or "partiality" of perception. If James as a traveller is something other than a liberal tourist it is because another economy of vision is at work here than that which conventionally underwrites capitalist sight-seeing, a general or unrestrained economy grounded in the essential "conditionality" or the "occasionalness" of Jamesian travel. The European travel essay is studied here as a way of elucidating the trope of travel in James's work as a whole, and of showing how the author's peculiarly American treatment of finitude, of mutability and of contingency, can be grasped through serious consideration of the travel motifs and narratives.

Tamara Follini also situates travel experience at the centre of the Jamesian aesthetic, but in doing so foregrounds one of the major risks inherent to the writer's highly speculative historical imagination. Consisting of a close reading of the travel essay on Ravenna in *Italian Hours*, this article reflects on the Jamesian notion of a "visitable" past, and in doing so reveals how the temporal distance required by James to secure the imaginative aura inherent to aesthetic desire can also become a threat to

the imagination, insofar as that distance borders on a sense of expatriation, exile or homelessness. Suggesting that one of the resources of the Jamesian imagination is the author's ability to discover elective affinity with previous writers, in this case Byron and Dante, both exiles temporarily resident in Ravenna, the article demonstrates how identification with these predecessors enabled James to transform a landscape that had risked appearing unreal, a mere simulacrum of the past, into one of vitally charged images and markers of an intimate geography. James's dependence on the presence of an imagined other to fill a perceived gap in his relation to his surroundings, notably as these surroundings echo sentiments which might otherwise have fallen irretrievably into the past, determines the author's study of intertextual relationships that inform the mediated nature of perception in the American writer's work.

A similar reliance on imagined otherness is analysed by Gert Buelens in the reading he offers of James's Sieneese impressions in *Italian Hours*. Here the traveller's relation to place is shown to be mediated by the rhetorical imagination, the use of anthropomorphism and prosopopoeia rendering the past present in a spectral manner. Subject and object, observer and scene, buildings and people, past and present are interwoven in James's vision of the Italian plaza in a manner which, far from amounting to a fusion or synthesis of perspective, emphasizes the parabolic nature of perception in the "brooding tourist." Perceptions of surface and depth are analysed here in conjunction with, if not as effects of, an opposition between performative and constative functions of language which underwrite the act of seeing. The mediated character of vision that manifests itself in the Sieneese sketches, as so often in James, in a spectral manner, provokes a paradoxically pleasurable pain in the tourist that is interpreted in affective terms related to sadomasochistic oppositions in the writer's work.

Two articles in this section dealing with James's continental travels focus on identity politics and perceptions of selfhood in the travel writings. Starting out with a discussion of the 1877 essay "Occasional Paris," but bringing in other travel essays and correspondence related to cultural appropriation and assimilation and ending with comments on *The American Scene*, Thomas Constantinesco studies how unstable oppositions like those between the native and the foreign, worldliness and patriotism, civility and barbarism are theatricalized in James's travelogues, where conflicting tendencies at the heart of the writer's cosmopolitanism are put to the test. The experience of border-crossings functions, according to the author, as a privileged locus in James for the negotiation of identities, notably through the traveller's fascinated encounter with the figure of the soldier. Here it is the unstable interweaving of the native and the foreign which, instead of leading to reconciliation, as one might expect, produces a mutual haunting at the level of identity and of national and racial self-awareness, showing that James's vaunted cosmopolitanism is considerably more complex when studied at a formal level of textual interpretation than it appears at the level of thematic understanding.

Greg Zacharias focuses on scenes from *A Little Tour in France* to bring attention to James's self-consciousness as an author obliged to earn his living partly by selling stories and novels, a situation that is viewed here as provoking a sense of sordidness

and shame in the writer which is projected upon the travelling salesmen he encounters at the Hôtel de France at Narbonne. James wrote of course at a time of rapidly accelerating cultural commodification and of mass aesthetic production that left him, in the view adopted here, reacting against a self-perceived “dirtiness” originating in the need to write for pecuniary purposes. The article shows James seeking cathartic release from his obsession with the travelling salesmen in a way that resembles certain of his ghost stories and the famous nightmare recorded in *A Small Boy and Others* that unfolds at the Galerie d’Apollon in the Louvre.

Eric Morel’s contribution, the final article of this section, takes us back to *Italian Hours* and examines sections from that work from ecotourist and econarratological perspectives. The focus once again is on the two-part travelogue, “Siena Early and Late,” written in 1873 and 1909, but the intensity of James’s historical perception here serves as a way of tracing a dawning sensitivity to Anthropocene temporalities, the sudden onset of Italian national modernity registering itself in the syntax and the temporal structure of the text in ways that may figure an implicit perception of deeper, geological time. Images of the inertia of the past as it collides with the speed of modern Italy, especially as it is observed in the second Sienna essay, provoke reactions in James related to impressions that are in fact deeper than what historical consciousness can grasp, but which are legible in the text. Given the still emerging state of ecocritical reflection on James’s work, the article offers suggestions, more often than conclusive analysis, intended to help orient the research of ecotourists, econarratologists and Jamesians interested in the ecological implications of modern travel.

The two articles comprising the section dealing with the writer’s tours in England each argue persuasively that the genre of the travelogue as it is practiced by James is a literary genre in its own right. Making her case that James’s travel writings are no less literary in character than his fiction or his other non-fictional prose, Sheila Teahan builds on recent critical discussions of the “Winchelsea, Rye and ‘Denis Duval’” chapter of *English Hours*—perhaps the least orthodox of all of James’s travel essays—, and focuses on the trope of aposiopesis, a discursive interruption, or falling silent, to examine how travel writing and the ghostly are related through their common interpenetration of absence and presence. While ghosts are typically related to place, a haunted house, for example, they are also related to time—they come and go, appear and disappear—, in ways that short-circuit memory and problematize temporal sequence in the travel memoir. The author’s rhetorical analysis of this curious travelogue, first published in 1901, performs an undoing of the “phenomenological theory of travel” and problematizes spatial suppositions proper to the idea of travel by reflecting on the deliberately hybrid nature of James’s essay.

Focusing, for her part, primarily on *English Hours* essays first written in the 1870s, Marie-Odile Salati demonstrates how scenarios from these early texts, in which a variety of figural motifs are repeated from one excursion to the next, serve as a crucible for the young novelist still discovering and developing his approach to literary representation. Examining the shift from observation to reflection via the trope of passage, and focusing on the linguistic and specular basis of creative imagination

and perception, the article demonstrates how in the early travel sketches James is working out the representational logic that will serve him in his novels and stories, and furthermore how this logic will enable him to propose an aesthetic response to prosaic modernity that differs considerably from that of the French Naturalist school that was hegemonic at the time. Her reading of the early travel sketches is completed by a reading of the 1905 essay devoted to London that James placed deliberately at the head of *English Hours*, showing how textual and spectral principles proper to the representational logic of his work became more self-evident to the writer in later years and reinforced his aesthetic convictions.

The third section of articles collected here is devoted to *The American Scene*, although, as is the case with several articles in the previous sections, diverse forays are sometimes made into other travelogues. Michel Imbert focuses at the outset on James's experience travelling south in the Pullman cars and the way the American landscape presents itself in compartmentalized sections which appear to reflect, as in a mirror, the flux of mental associations of the traveller. When the landscape changes, however, notably as the view of vast watery expanses gives way to images of industrial and technological modernity in the north, a less familiar and more uncanny representation of consciousness is reflected which James appears to find troubling, a mechanical representation that may not be assimilated to consciousness at all. William James's notion of a "stream of consciousness" is enlisted here to conceptualize the shift from a romantic conception of the psyche to more disjunctive, materialist modes of perception. Yet the article probes beyond W. James's assertion of the fluidity and unfixity of consciousness to suggest a possible complicity, avowable or not, between the mental processes of the "restless analyst" and the automated power of modernity that Henry Adams conceptualized in his image of the Dynamo.

Elaborating a formal concept of serialism in his study of *The American Scene*, Adam Lowenstein also insists on an impersonal and materialist dimension to James's writing, but from the perspective of the work's composition rather than that of the cognitive trope of the restless and brooding analyst. Indeed, while conceived as a book, much of the late travel narrative first appeared in periodic instalments in several publications. The apparent constraints of serial publication, with which James had become familiar over the years in the writing of fiction, turn out to provide a structural means exploited in the travelogue to capture a sense of unity that transcends the organizing potential of tropes like synecdoche or metaphor, revealing a peculiarly modern openness to what the grasping imagination cannot contain, and leading the reader beyond traditional but still widespread receptions of the author as bound by organic conceptions of selfhood, nationhood and aesthetics. Showing how the expansiveness of the American nation threatens the aesthetic project of presenting a coherent "representative illusion" of his impressions, the author argues that perception in James is always provisional, adaptable to and conditioned by serial perspectives.

Finally, my own contribution focuses on the question of aesthetic presentation in *The American Scene*, as this question has been handed down to us by Kant and a certain continental philosophical tradition and its deconstruction. The article studies

disjunction in the text as an opposition between performative and constative, rhetorical and specular functions of language, arguing that this disjunction ruins any possibility of the text saying anything in a reliably documentary manner, underwriting instead the emergence of what appears as the dominant trope of the text, its irony. Examining briefly a number of key scenarios in *The American Scene* where perception and the effort to “make sense” are each time revealed to be undermined by figural or tropological excess, the article focuses in particular on the specular presentation of Sargent’s portrait of Major Henry Lee Higginson in the book’s first chapter, and argues that it is finally the presentation of the gap between linguistic functions which, suppressed in the aesthetic ideology that James observes in the hotel-world of the American spirit, holds critical promise for readers in our modern world of spectacle where the essential finitude and historicity of human experience is occulted.

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