

Introduction

What Then Is the American Scene?

In his 1877 essay, “An English Easter,” revised for *English Hours* (1905), James admits his inability to give a technically analytical account of the architectural success that Canterbury Cathedral must undoubtedly be. All he can do is sketch “the picture, the mere builded *scene*.”¹ Thus he notes how the “huge Gothic tower ... detaches itself with tremendous effect”: “You see it base itself upon the roof as broadly as if it were striking roots in earth, and then pile itself away to a height which seems to make the very swallows dizzy as they drop from the topmost shelf.”² Nature, in *English Hours*, is an important resource for the travel writer, but it is invariably a part of the “*builded scene*,” to shift the emphasis of James’s words. If the characterization of the bell tower draws on nature for its foundational imagery, James’s overall assessment of the cathedral stresses the latter’s indebtedness to its natural setting: the building’s “grand feature — its extraordinary and magnificent length” can be appreciated only by virtue of the crucial fact that it “stands amid grass and trees, with a cultivated margin all round it.”³

The challenge offered by the American scene is that it is such a strikingly *un-builded* scene. “Here was no church, to begin with,” James writes in the first chapter of *The American Scene*: “New England: An Autumn Impression.”⁴ Far from boasting huge towers that stand out from their surroundings while at the same time firmly rooting themselves there, all New England has to offer is the “shrill effect of [its] meeting-house, ... so merely continuous and congruous, as to type and tone, with the common objects about it, the single straight breath with which it seems to blow the ground clear of the seated solidity of religion ...” (375). Echoing

1. Henry James, *English Hours*, in *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*, ed. Richard Howard (New York: Library of America, 1993), 126. Unless otherwise noted, all emphases taken from the originals.

2. *Ibid.*, 126-28.

3. *Ibid.*, 126.

4. Henry James, *The American Scene*, in *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*, ed. Richard Howard (New York: Library of America, 1993), 375. Further references to this text will be given parenthetically.

the famous list of absences from the American scene that he had provided in *Hawthorne*,⁵ James, the “restless analyst” (as he regularly refers to himself in the book), here too registers the social emptiness of that scene — the fact that neither “the squire” nor “the parson” hold “sway” over it, as they do over “the familiar English landscape” (375). In addition, the travelogue expresses distress over the inveterate continuity and congruity that make it impossible to analyze the scene, to distinguish among the items that make up this “vast and vacant” spectacle (376).

Yet, strangely, the language that James employs to give voice to his unhappiness itself seems to perform stylistically the very continuity and congruity that he so deplores thematically. The insistent alliteration that marks the passage just quoted links up those (closely adjacent) elements that share not only an initial consonant cluster but also a paradigmatic meaning, as in “continuous and congruous,” “type and tone,” “single straight,” “vast and vacant.” What is surprising, even at this microlevel, is that this negatively valenced list should be extended to include the equally alliterative but positively charged “seated solidity” with which it is supposedly contrasted; indeed, the latter’s initial consonant even creates a syntagmatic continuity within the same clause with the “single straight breath” that has just been depicted as the “shrill” enemy. Moreover, at the macrolevel of *The American Scene* as a whole, alliteration acts as a ubiquitous phenomenon that is no mere stylistic quirk. Instead, it weaves together the text in a “continuous and congruous” manner that is distinctly at odds with the penetrative thrust of the analysis to which that text purports to submit the American scene — a manner that is, if anything, syntagmatically mimetic of the “criminal continuity” that, from a paradigmatic perspective, the critically minded narrator is constantly at pains to expose (736).

Such is the basic tension that governs *The American Scene*: on the one hand, the “restless analyst” is eager to probe beneath the surface of the American spectacle that he wants to understand; on the other hand, the narrator’s sensibility frequently seems to beat to the same tune as the surface that provokes his penetrating impulse. This tendency can be observed not just at the stylistic level, but also at those moments when the narrator admits that “analysis [is] for once quite agreeably baffled,” moments that occur much less rarely than “for once” would lead one to assume (527). But it would be wrong to suggest that *The American Scene* engages in site analysis only when the text is dominated by the voice of

5. “No State, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, ... no literature, no novels, no museums, ..., no Epsom nor Ascot!” See Henry James, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature: American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel, with the assistance of Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 352.

the “restless analyst,” who examines, makes distinctions, classifies. Rather, James’s largely fruitless attempts to get to grips with the American scene on such a paradigmatic basis ultimately find themselves more than matched by his successful submission to the syntagmatic charm of that scene.

James’s first impulse, however, is to meet the challenge of a New England that lacks culture and history by searching hard for whatever small items as might fill his deep need for these qualities. Thus he rhapsodizes the “house on a hilltop” that owns some “wondrous examples” of impressionist painting (393). Its effect on the spirit is like that of “a large slippery sweet inserted, without warning, between the compressed lips of half-conscious inanition” (393). The experience proves the “sovereign power of art,” and thus briefly erects a paradigmatic axis in the New England landscape (394). It is a fortuitous coincidence — unless it be a narrative invention — that the house is located on a hilltop, a geographical position that reinforces the “sovereign power” with which the narrator is so taken. Yet even here one cannot help but notice the pull of the horizontal axis in the alliteration that is once more inescapably present. Not only does the “house on a hilltop” overlook “the most composed of communities,” the art itself is for their consumer like a “large slippery sweet.” The initial consonant clusters of which this phrase consists (made up of the alliterative /s/ and /l/ as well as the /w/) all share the phonological feature “continuant” — produced as they are “with an incomplete closure of the vocal tract” — thus undergirding in their form precisely that continuous quality of New England that the “sovereign power of art” is at the same time supposedly exposing as unbearably empty (393).⁶ How strange, moreover, the content of the image is too. How odd that James should choose to describe the effect of art as a slippery sweet — an expression reminiscent, say, of “the sense of the slippery and of the sticky” that so unpleasantly marks Lionel Croy’s abode in the opening scene of *The Wings of the Dove*.⁷ And if painting by Manet, Degas, Monet and Whistler is welcomed as a “large slippery sweet,” is there such a sharp distinction between the pleasure high art affords and that “single strong savour” offered “among the mountains of

6. See David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 72.

7. See Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 1978), 21. The “large slippery sweet” must be qualified, too, in the light of James’s comments in a later section of *The American Scene* on the American “solicitation of sugar”: “The wage-earners, the toilers of old, notably in other climes, were known by the wealth of their songs; and has it, on these lines, been given to the American people to be known by the number of their ‘candies’ ” (517-18).

Massachusetts and Connecticut" (388)? There, "the mere *fusion* of earth and air and water, of light and shade and colour, the almost shameless tolerance of nature for the poor human experiment, are so happily effective that you lose all reckoning of the items of the sum, that you in short find in your draught, contentedly, a single strong savour" (388-89; italics in original). In its "shameless tolerance" nature here becomes an all-embracing force whose capacity to fuse everything together takes care of any possible objection the critical bent of the restless analyst could come up with, of any attempt of his at "reckoning." The upshot is that he undergoes this "mere *fusion* ... contentedly."

If culture proves powerless to erect a barrier against the essentially syntagmatic force that operates throughout the American scene, so does history. Trying on this basis too to break New England's "criminal continuity," the narrator focuses on such traces of the region's "history" as "the classic abandoned farm of the rude forefather who had lost patience with his fate" (736, 368). Yet these vestiges of the past — "the dried-up well, the cart-track vague and lost" — have largely been "reclaimed by nature and time" (368). Their "meagreness," moreover, cannot compete with "the queer *other*, the larger, eloquence that one kept reading into the picture." Even the historical legend of the Indian who jumped into the abyss from the "silvered summit" of Chocorua Mountain to escape his pursuers cannot command the observer's interest amidst "the mere idleness of the indiscriminated, tangled actual." Such is the larger eloquence of what James calls "naturalism in *quantity* such quantity as one hadn't for years had to deal with" (368).⁸ Faced with a natural force that is so overwhelming, that casts such "an irresistible spell," the narrator has to admit that here is "a luxury corrupting the judgment" (368).⁹

The New England countryside also forms the setting for some of the traveller's most unsettling encounters with the ethnic other in the United States. Thus in a passage whose page-head reads "The Ubiquity of the Alien," the narrator recounts how, having lost his way "during a long ramble among the New Hampshire hills," he turns for help to a young man who has just emerged from a wood. "But his stare was blank, in

8. As William Boelhower observes, "in no other Jamesian text is quantity so much in the foreground." See "The Landscape of Democratic Sovereignty: Whitman and James Go Awalking," in *Modern American Landscapes*, ed. Mick Gidley and Robert Lawson-Peebles (Amsterdam: VU Univ. Press, 1995), 65.

9. For an extremely rich and valuable reading of "James's uneasy perceptual attempts to balance nature and culture in his American scenes" see Susan M. Griffin, *The Historical Eye: The Texture of the Visual in Late James*, esp. Chapter 3: "The Fall into History: The Visual Landscape of *The American Scene*" (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1991), 91-147 (quotation from 94).

answer to my inquiry" (454). Confidently drawing on his cultural literacy, the restless analyst reads the young man's "dark-eyed 'Latin' look" as a sign of "his being a French Canadian," or possibly an Italian immigrant. But neither of these languages proves successful in breaking the man's silence. It is only the exasperated exclamation "What *are* you then?" that produces the information that his interlocutor is an Armenian. Upset as he already is by his difficulty in ascertaining which language to adopt for ease of communication, the "restored absentee" experiences a particular "chill" when he finds that the Armenian-American seems to expect no social intercourse, no sense of "brotherhood" (457, 454, 455). The "vacant" American scene here finds its match in the new American's "blank" stare; the lack of susceptibility of that scene to analysis is paralleled by the impossibility of reading the Armenian-American's character (376, 454). Indeed, James goes on to speak of "the great 'ethnic' question" in terms that closely mirror his remarks on the overwhelming quality of America's "irresistible" "naturalism" (368): "the great 'ethnic' question rises before you on a corresponding scale and with a corresponding majesty" (455). It thus becomes just as pointless to try and answer the ethnic question as it is to try and escape from the vast and vacant natural scene. Only an "accepted vision of the too-defiant scale of numerosity and quantity" can be embraced, and rested in "at last as an absolute luxury" that does away with any attempt at judgment, at "some propriety of opinion" (456-57).

Alluding in a richly ironical vein to the scene with the Armenian, James's account of his visit to Salem opens with the following hyperbole:

It never failed that if in moving about I made, under stress, an inquiry, I should prove to have made it of a flagrant foreigner. It never happened that, addressing a fellow-citizen, in the street, on one of those hazards of possible communion with the indigenous spirit, I should not draw a blank. So, inevitably, at Salem, when, wandering perhaps astray, I asked my way to the House of the Seven Gables, the young man I had overtaken was true to his nature; he stared at me as a remorseless Italian — as remorseless, at least, as six months of Salem could leave him. (572)

But if the similarity of this experience to the earlier one is striking — even at the level of the lexical choice of calling the stare blank — the moment is particularly interesting by virtue of James's further speculation on how differently the accosted Italian in all likelihood would have valued the historical landmark the narrator is searching out. Wondering "how the native estimate of it as a romantic ruin might strike a taste formed for such features by the landscape of Italy," James cannot preserve his original attraction to "the edifice of my fond fancy," finding that he is now

reduced to looking at it “through a polyglot air” (572, 574). That air is, significantly, not just polluted by the Italian — a Southern European who belongs to a class of particularly “flagrant” foreigners, undesirable to many Americans of Anglo-Irish descent — but also by “a civil Englishman,” full of “kindness and sympathy,” who likewise serves to point James’s way around Salem, directing him to some houses that in his opinion “formed the Grosvenor Square, as might be said, of Salem” (573). The effect of this comparison on the narrator is not a happy one. He had “never bargained for” such a way of considering his very own Salem (573). The presence of the Italian and the Englishman rearranges this site so that the vertical associations James had been seeking there — those not only of “Hawthorne’s Salem, and the witches’ ” but also of personal history in the form of an earlier occasion when he had stayed at the place — are replaced by horizontal ones that extend across the ocean to European landscapes (572). These geographical associations not only push aside the historical ones; they also diminish the special value that James had been eager to assign to these American sites. What is so flagrant and remorseless about the foreigners James meets, no matter how civil and full of kindness they be, is not so much that they answer his inquiries with a blank stare, but rather that their contiguity exposes the American scene for the cultural and historical blank that it ultimately is. The criminal continuity, that is, stops nowhere: the “polyglot air” blurs James’s “native” vision of Salem with the thought of how others perceive the place. His own “approximation” of the site — his own comparisons and similes — is mixed up with those non-native ones, and realizing this leaves him “rather essentially shaken” (572-74).

But it is important to remember that James’s own “native” status is a rather questionable one. Indeed, he often labels himself the “restored absentee,” a cognomen that reminds the reader of his twenty-year absence from the country of his birth. Or, as he famously puts it in the context of his ruminations on “the great ‘ethnic’ question,” “Who and what is an alien ... in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history? Which is the American ... — which is *not* the alien ... and where does one put a finger on the dividing line ...?” (459). The difficulty of distinguishing national paradigms is not just due to the troubling presence of Italians and Englishmen in New England, the restored absentee is at times just as flagrant a foreigner on this scene. Consider his response to what he calls “The New England Arcadia” in one of the running titles of the first chapter (367). Wandering about in the “deep valleys and the wide woodlands,” James is full of “the beauty of the impression.” The New England “hills and woods ... play on the chords of memory and association,” but the memory is not just that of “some bedimmed summer of the distant prime” spent in the area. Actually, there is “much unacquaintedness” with what he sees; he is struck above all by

“the newness, to my eyes, ... of the particular rich region.”¹⁰ As to association, the “whole connotation” that is brought home is that of “the Arcadia of an old tapestry, an old legend, an old love-story in fifteen volumes, one of those of Mademoiselle de Scudéri.” In other words, the whole connotation is incorrigibly European, as the term Arcadia would already lead one to suspect.¹¹ The New England “hillsides and rocky eminences and wild orchards ... could strike one as the more exquisitely and ideally Sicilian, Theocritan, poetic, romantic, academic, from their not bearing the burden of too much history” (367-68). If the restless analyst on principle complains of the lack of history on the American scene, he is ready to admit, in passing, that it is the very absence of historical reference points that allows this American landscape to take on all the redemptive features of “the idyllic *type* in its purity” — a type that has of course been shaped in classical Europe, and a purity that is preserved exactly by virtue of New England’s emptiness (367). Clearly then that criminal continuity that makes a mouthful even of the mighty Atlantic (to paraphrase James’s final-page line) is perpetrated not just by the recent immigrants and tourists who adulterate the native’s perception of his place, but is also indulged in by a restored absentee who is grateful when the natural landscape of his country of birth can be assimilated to a European model.

If the New England landscape provokes associations that are at times undesirably syntagmatic, the analyst’s attempt at ascertaining a genuinely American paradigm is not always unsuccessful. Thus Concord, that “charming woody and watery place,” is pleasantly haunted by “the local Emerson and Thoreau and Hawthorne and (in a fainter way) *tutti quanti*” (568). Referring to them as “the ‘American Weimar’ company,” James goes on to admit that “we may smile a little as we ‘drag in’ Weimar,” but immediately adds that he is “much more satisfied than not by our happy equivalent, ‘in American money,’ for Goethe and Schiller” (568, 571). The smile, then, seems to ironize the American company in relation to its more illustrious European counterpart — even the quotation marks around “in American money” are suggestive of an inescapable metonymical link between American intellectual achievement and a

10. A fascinating rhetorical exploration of “James’s encounter with the ‘virgin’ text of America” that focuses on its dramatization of “the problem of the allegorical sign” is offered by Sheila Teahan, “Engendering Culture in *The American Scene*,” *The Henry James Review* 17 (1996): 52-57 (quotation from 52).

11. Griffin explores the significance of “Arcadia” as “a middle ground between wilderness and city, nature and civilization” in the context of the functioning of the visual in late James. See *The Historical Eye*, 160.

suspect materialist way of measuring value. Yet, James goes on to make it clear that his appreciation of his compatriots' work is quite genuine. "I open Emerson for the same benefit for which I open Goethe, the sense of moving in large intellectual space ... and whatever I open Thoreau for (I needn't take space here for the good reasons) I open him oftener than I open Schiller" (571-72). And to bestow such compliments on Thoreau and particularly Emerson — the silver and gold respectively of "the 'Concord school' " — is also to pay a compliment to the territory from which they drew so much of their text, and to which their texts in turn imparted such quantities (571):

[T]he rarity of Emerson's genius, which has made him ... the first, and the one really rare, American spirit in letters, couldn't have spent his career [at Concord] without an effect as of the communication to it of something ineffaceable. It was during his long span his immediate concrete, sufficient world; it gave him his nearest vision of life, and he drew half his images, we recognize, from the revolution of its seasons and the play of its manners. ... It is admirably, to-day, as if we were still seeing these things *in* those images ... [N]ot a russet leaf fell for me, while I was there, but fell with an Emersonian drop. (572)

Concord is not just the place inhabited by Emerson's genius. It also breathes the spirit of American political history so actively that James imagines himself catching, "on the breeze, the mitigated perfect tense" (568). History is here no matter of what was but of what has been: " 'You know there has been a fight between our men and the King's' — one wouldn't have been surprised, that crystalline Sunday noon, where so little had changed, where the stream and the bridge, and all nature, and the *feeling*, above all, so directly testify, at any fresh-sounding form of such an announcement" (568). Political history takes the form, importantly, of that 1775 battle at Concord that marked one of the first stages in the War of Independence. James waxes quite lyrical on the "colossal quantity and value" of the minutemen's action on behalf of later generations of Americans (570). Yet there is also "exquisite melancholy" in "the pity and the irony of the *precluded* relation on the part of the fallen defenders" (569). That is to say, present-day Americans like James himself can at once enjoy the fruits of Concord Fight in the here and now *and* undergo the special atmosphere of the place so as to feel at one with "the toil and trouble of our forefathers" (570). The act of historical imagining is cruelly unidirectional: "The sense that was theirs and that moved them we know, but we seem to know better still the sense that wasn't and that couldn't, and that forms our luxurious heritage as our eyes, across the gulf, seek to meet their eyes; so that we are almost ashamed of taking so much ... as the

equivalent of their dimly-seeing offer" (569-70). The relation between text and territory is always such that "we read into the scene"; it can never read into us (569). As archaeologists of a site that has historical meaning for ourselves, we are constantly made aware of the moral dubiety of our activity: is not "the imagination that yearns over" these historical figures enjoying them "at their cost" (570)? "Was it delicate, was it decent — that is *would* it have been — to ask the embattled farmers, simple-minded, unwitting folk, to make us so inordinate a present with so little of the conscious credit of it?" Is not our historical speculation in sharp contrast to their "disinterested sacrifice"? In summing up these thought movements, James invokes a telling simile: "The minute-men at the bridge were of course interested intensely, as they believed — but such, too, was the artful manner in which we see *our* latent, lurking, waiting interest like, [sic] a Jew in a dusky backshop, providentially bait the trap" (570). Ultimately, the "gulf" that divides the narrator from his American ancestors is so wide that he ends up by likening himself to a member of that class of immigrants that will strike him elsewhere on the American scene as so utterly "alien." The historical gulf is, in the final reckoning, no less wide, if not wider, than the ocean that separates America from Europe.

Henry James and the "Aliens" is concerned throughout to address the gulf that separates native-born and immigrant, European and American in James's late non-fiction. Yet it also explores the continuities — criminal or otherwise — that keep on reuniting these paradigmatically distinct socio-geographical categories. In placing this emphasis, my book intervenes in current debates in James studies, most notably in the key areas of cultural studies, ethnic studies and queer studies. Focusing throughout on James's sense of identity, and most prominently on how the latter is given shape in the very form of the late Jamesian style, I find that James's response to the ethnic other can be grasped neither as an attempt to police, supervise and master the other, nor as a politics of non-identical surrender to that other.¹² Identity, in James, does exist, but it cannot simply be equated with the "I"'s possessive mastery: it is made up quite as much of surrender to the agreeably possessive "Other." I further argue that Jamesian sexual identity, too, is constantly reconstituted in transitive processes of signification that make it impossible to fix the "I" or the "other" within a definition-based framework — be that framework a

12. The first argument is Seltzer's; the second Posnock's. See Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984); Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).

heterosexual or a homosexual one. The eroticism that strikingly informs the late James can therefore only be captured, if at all, under the rubric of the "queer."

As Banta observes, "The list of scholars currently engaged in evaluating James's credibility as an effective social critic is lengthy."¹³ The rise of cultural studies has undoubtedly contributed to the current preoccupation with this topic among James scholars, most of whom have rightly turned primarily to *The American Scene* in pursuit of this interest. Indeed, at present that book is one of the most intensively studied texts in the James canon. If in 1992 it was still possible to claim that "hardly anything has been written about *The American Scene*," by 1998 interest in the work had dramatically increased.¹⁴ In 1994 Penguin for the first time published an edition of *The American Scene*, making it newly available for the classroom and the mass market.¹⁵ In 1995 *The Henry James Review* published a "Race Forum" that carried no less than five essays wholly devoted to the book, while two others addressed it alongside a novel of James's.¹⁶ According to the MLA Bibliography as many articles (16) were published on the work between 1992 and 1996 as in the ten

13. See Martha Banta, "'Strange Deserts': Hotels, Hospitals, Country Clubs, Prisons, and the City of Brotherly Love," *Henry James Review* 17 (1996): 1-10 (quotation from 1).

14. Andrew Cutting, "Henry James and 'Vulgarity,'" *English* 41 (1992): 114. Cutting's claim should be somewhat modified, given the 51 articles, essays, and discussions in books that Hewitt had already managed to unearth as early as 1980. It should be added, though, that these appeared over a period of more than 60 years (1914-1977), and that Hewitt's list is unusually exhaustive, also including publications not normally covered by academic bibliographies such as the MLA's. Yet, Hewitt's excellent overview does demonstrate a distinct leap of interest in *The American Scene* subsequent to the publication of Edel's paperback edition of the work in 1968, with some 18 scholarly studies appearing over the course of the next ten years. This is, however, also the period that saw an immense boom in the discipline of English as such. See Rosalie Hewitt, "Henry James's *The American Scene*: Its Genesis and Its Reception, 1905-1977," *Henry James Review* 1 (1980): 187-92. For additional material on James as a social and cultural critic, see the very useful collection *Henry James on Culture: Collected Essays on Politics and the American Social Scene*, ed. Pierre A. Walker (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1999).

15. Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. John F. Sears (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994). Before that date, the only widely available paperback edition was the one edited by Leon Edel (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), which enjoyed greater popularity than the one prepared by Irving Howe (New York: Horizon, 1967). Hewitt notes that this may have been due not only to "Edel's textual and biographical notes," but also to the fact that his introductory essay "seems to have had a more receptive audience than Howe's," the latter casting James "as a conservative writing in an elegiac mode," while Edel held that "James's skeptical vision of America's future was not a manifestation of nostalgic longing for a lost America" (Hewitt, 195).

16. *Henry James Review* 16 (1995): 249-303.

years prior to 1992.¹⁷

At the fountainhead of this recent surge of attention for James's status as a social and cultural critic stands Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity*, published in 1991. The book has forcefully and influentially attacked received wisdom about James's staidness and investment in the values of High Art, supposedly secluded in an ivory tower of aesthetic transcendence. Posnock has argued instead that James's late work practices a "politics of nonidentity." The Jamesian self, he claims, displays an unwonted openness to experience, manifests a dynamic interest in the social, seeks out the marginal and liminal, actively surrenders the self-possessed ego to the reality of the other. There are no fixed values in the world of late James; only fluidity, dissolution, context. Posnock's assessment of James's attitude to the ethnic other is therefore wholly laudatory. There is no substantial difference between "self" and "other" in a work like *The American Scene*. James regards himself as quite as much an "alien" to America as the recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe that he so dubs, and dissolves all distinctions between the members of this dynamic category.

A few years prior to Posnock, William Boelhower had propounded (yet not developed in any detail) essentially the same thesis with regard to James and the "aliens," finding, for instance, that James displays a remarkable openness to "the interpretative dynamics of the other," and is eager to submit to "a fluid process of ethnic semiosis," in which both self and ethnic other "are decentered onlookers, both on the margins."¹⁸ One recent study closely coincides with Posnock's perspective on James's engagement with the Jewish immigrant. Indeed, Beverly Haviland's *Henry James's Last Romance* not only finds that, when James visited his country in 1904 after a twenty-year absence, "he did not return as a native but as an alien," she also argues that the Jews, for James, stand as an "encourag[ing]" example: they have "escaped falling prey to ... typical American dangers ... by holding on to a sense of their past, by

17. The current heightened interest (as opposed to that of the seventies) would not appear to be simply a reflection of increased scholarly activity in the field of English or of James studies as a whole. For *The Portrait of a Lady* (chosen as a random example of a more canonical Jamesian text), an average of five publications a year are listed between 1992 and 1996, compared to almost ten a year for the period 1981-1991. In Chapter Four of my *Henry James: Style, History and Ethics: A Bibliographical Study* (Brussels: Center for American Studies, 1996) I place the current attention for James's socio-historical anchoring within the wider context of the development of James studies.

18. See William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (Venice, 1984; New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 23.

making continuity crucial to their ethnic identity.”¹⁹ Far from registering doubts about James’s effectiveness as a social critic, Haviland is prepared to subscribe even to such generally mistrusted evaluations as his dark thoughts on the fate of the English language and to offer sympathetic glosses on what most have regarded as suspect imagery, such as the simile between the “strength” of the Jewish “race” and the “snakes or worms, ... who, when cut into pieces, wriggle away contentedly and live in the snippet as completely as in the whole.”²⁰ Since Posnock’s book, most scholars working in this area have, as we will see, accepted the truth of his conclusions at least in part; that is to say, they have agreed that there are several moments in *The American Scene* where James demonstrates an openness to the ethnic other. Yet no one has so far offered a persuasive account of what these moments have in common, and of how the very different character of other passages can be explained. Such an account, I argue, will need to rest on a more complex understanding of the relation between self and other in James’s writing than has been provided even by a perceptive scholar like Posnock.

What is more, in spite of Posnock’s revisionary argument, a considerable number of critics continue to be so strongly offended by imagery such as that just quoted, and indeed by James’s frequent use of the term “alien” to refer to the immigrant, that their overall estimate of James’s record on race is deeply negative. One recent example is Bryan Washington, who experiences great difficulty in understanding why James Baldwin — whom he studies in relation to Henry James and Scott Fitzgerald — admired the Master so much. “If such writing [as *The American Scene*’s] is representative, symptomatic of James’s nativism and of his elitism, then why did Baldwin, by contrast a progressive, bother to read him at all?”²¹ Another is Eli Ben-Joseph, whose self-labeled study of “James’s antisemitism” accords a crucial place to *The American Scene*. That work for him demonstrates how the late James “apparently forgot his charge against the ugliness of ... antisemitism in the Dreyfus affair,” and set out to heap abuse on the Jews.²² Nonetheless, neither of these two studies goes quite as far as a few older works in voicing disgust over

19. See Beverly Haviland, *Henry James’s Last Romance: Making Sense of the Past and the American Scene* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 135, 153, 152.

20. Haviland, 152; James, *American Scene*, 465.

21. Bryan R. Washington, *The Politics of Exile: Ideology in Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Baldwin* (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1995), 19.

22. Eli Ben-Joseph, *Aesthetic Persuasion: Henry James, the Jews and Race* (Lanham: Univ. Press of America, 1996), 172, 170.

James's view of the ethnic other. One 1986 study of the dialectic of self and other in late James claims that, in *The American Scene*, "James is unhappy with the whole reality of this surge of foreigners into America and would prefer to have the problem vanish: on a subconscious level, he would like a landscape purged of the 'grosser aliens'"; indeed, according to this reading, James would unconsciously desire "some ultimate solution which would remove the aliens from the scene."²³ There is little to distinguish this interpretation from Geismar's observation, in the course of a more systematic attack on *The American Scene*, that James fervently hoped for a knight who would "combat [the immigrant,] this ominous and threatening menace to *his* American scene." No such knight appeared, "unless it was the Germanic Hitler who used a more barbarous mythology, combined with all the skills of scientific industrial technology, to quell the same alien presence."²⁴

Most recent studies of James arrive at a more balanced assessment of his relation to the "alien." An influential contribution from 1993, Kenneth Warren's *Black and White Strangers*, has managed to persuade even Posnock that his own account might have glossed over some intractable aspects of James's stance. For Warren, who devotes most attention to James's image of black people, it is troubling that such a fascinating writer should have resorted frequently to black stereotypes — figures who are and remain mired in vulgarity — while white characters are allowed at the very least to accede to consciousness.²⁵ Posnock's conclusion from this is forthright: "One can revel in and demonstrate in ever-ingenuous ways the subtleties of James's serpentine negotiation with otherness. But Warren's judgment will remain unmoved and unmovable."²⁶ Posnock's observation is not just a *mea culpa*; it is also directed at a paper of Sara Blair's on *The American Scene* that has meanwhile been integrated into her *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation*.²⁷ Indeed, Blair overall is a highly enthusiastic supporter of what she calls "James's cultural politics." In Posnock's wake, she

23. Donna Przybylowicz, *Desire and Repression: The Dialectic of Self and Other in the Late Works of Henry James* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1986), 257, 259.

24. Maxwell Geismar, *Henry James and the Jacobites* (Boston: Houghton, 1963), 350.

25. See Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).

26. Ross Posnock, "Henry James and the Limits of Historicism," *Henry James Review* 16 (1995), 276.

27. Sara Blair, "Documenting America: Racial Theater in *The American Scene*," *Henry James Review* 16 (1995), 264-72.

applauds *The American Scene* as a “magnificently antimagisterial text, ... a fluidly responsive, contextually alert study.” She is particularly interested in what this book, and a range of other Jamesian writings, have to say on the “emerging idioms and technologies for constructing national and racial subjects.” Yet, in contrast to Posnock’s reading of Blair, I would emphasize that her study is constantly at pains to point out the limitations of James’s laudable “documentary project.” If Blair invokes Posnock’s book to agree that “*The American Scene* attempts to create a space of cultural agency and production beyond the reach of bourgeois and progressive expertise,” she qualifies James’s success in this project, adding that the book “nonetheless remains vitally alive to the power of those [bourgeois and progressive] habits of seeing, recording, and constructing preeminently racial feeling.” For Blair, “James’s narrative” at once “aligns itself with emerging mass cultural modes of documentary” and “contest[s] them for the power to name Americanness” On the one hand, James cannot escape from the practice of “extending linked idioms of racial panic and progressivism,” on the other hand, “his narratives of phantasmagoric ‘excess’ and ‘multiplication’ nonetheless contest the forms of mastery and management through which America is being constructed under the sign of entertainment.”²⁸ A similar evenhandedness informs several other studies of *The American Scene* that are less centrally concerned with James and the “aliens.” Thus Kevin McNamara notes with regard to some zoological imagery that occurs in the same context as the simile between the Jews and the “snakes and worms” that, while “James’s apparent bestialization of tenement dwellers [is] offensive,” another at first sight suspect aspect of his description of the New York Jewish ghetto, “the picture of a bustling and even recreational life on fire escapes,” is actually “no fiction.”²⁹ Martha Banta, too, sees distinctions among James’s responses in *The American Scene*, identifying “different reactions to matters of ... us and them, depending upon whether it is James the private individual who is affected, or James the eager craftsman.”³⁰ John Carlos Rowe observes that “James feared the ‘masses,’ especially the immigrants to America, for whom he could at once express sympathy for their socioeconomic oppression and contempt for their lack of development and cultivation. *The American Scene* gives ample evidence

28. Sara Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 13-14.

29. Kevin McNamara, *Urban Verbs: Arts and Discourse of American Cities* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 43-44.

30. Banta, 1. Banta’s concern in this essay is mainly with what I have just elided: matters of “inside and outside,” private and public space.

of James's fears of immigrant cultures."³¹

One recent account of James's relation to the Jewish "alien" deserves to be treated in its own right, since it offers a highly sophisticated, complex, as well as elegant reading of what it nevertheless comes to define as a case of "antisemitism." For Jonathan Freedman, certain moments in *The American Scene* (which he identifies as the central Jamesian text on the topic) "suggest that, while James here writes in fear of the proliferative energy of the alien in general and the Jew in particular, he simultaneously glosses those very qualities as signs of a thoroughly praiseworthy vitality." However, he feels that what is at stake "is more than just a simple (or complex) case of ambivalence": "Underneath the tense interplay between anti- and philosemitism evident in *The American Scene* lies what can only be described as a structuring, second-order antisemitism, a persistently problematic pattern of thinking and writing that installs the Jew in the position of the vexing other — and that is all the more problematic because it half-recognizes in that figure the shadowy double of the Jamesian artist or the things that he would value."³² Eloquently arguing that "James's own, heavily culturally overdetermined aspirations for 'mastery' ... involved a process by which he was forced to repress with particular vigor all the messy, fluid formations of his own psyche," Freedman links this fact to James's image of the Jew. "Inflating the power of the artist-Jew, James connects that figure to all the things in his own sexual and emotional makeup that he is forced to deny himself, but at the same time constructs that figure as one connected to filth, degeneration, decay."³³

As will be apparent from the manner in which the preceding overview has been structured, I find most persuasive those recent studies of James's relation to the "alien" that steer a middle course between embracing what apologists regard as his multiculturalist modernity and rejecting what critics see as his nativism and elitism. Particularly

31. John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), 30. Rowe's book focuses on the early and experimental phases of James's career. When he comments, more briefly, on James's engagement with otherness in the works of the final phase that my study scrutinizes, he finds that "every effort by James to identify with immigrants is complicated by his repugnance for them" (204, n. 61). In what follows, I address the exact nature of the "contradictory emotions" that govern James's response after the turn of the century, finding that his is no such straightforward case of emotional ambivalence (ibid.).

32. Jonathan Freedman, "Henry James and the Discourses of Antisemitism," in *Between 'Race' and Culture: Representations of 'the Jew' in English and American Literature*, ed. Bryan Cheyette (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 67.

33. Ibid., 79.

interesting are endeavours like Blair's and Freedman's, but also Haviland's, which have in common that they devote a great deal of attention to the context in which James's writing appeared. Thus part of Blair's aim is to show how Jamesian high culture is as good a site to study the emergence of American national and racial identities as the popular culture in which racial resistance is more commonly situated — if not actually a better one. Freedman's essay usefully covers a lot of the contemporaneous eugenicist material and can hence conclude that James's antisemitism, while showing disturbing parallels, was relatively mild in comparison. Haviland's achievement is that she locates James's relation to the cultural other against the background of highly relevant theories of semiotics, consumption, race and ethnicity that were being developed by such contemporaries of James's as C.S. Peirce, Veblen, Du Bois and Riis.

Yet if such contextualization can greatly enrich our overall understanding of a cultural phenomenon such as, say, the writing of race, my scrutiny of the conclusions arrived at by the scholars just cited makes me hesitate to share their apparent assumption that it will also necessarily enhance our specific understanding of James's relation to the "alien" in a key work like *The American Scene*. The problem is intimately connected to the very strength of these studies, in this sense that the considerable amount of space that is set aside for examination of contemporary material often leaves insufficient room for that close analysis of James's words, sentences, and paragraphs that strikes me as essential to a proper assessment of his perspective on the ethnic other. Thus, Blair's frequent emphasis on James's "documentary project," and especially on his "contestatory interest in the framing of racial and national fate," associates his writing with a degree of "aggressive" purposiveness that may well facilitate an educative parallel to progressivism but that also comes across as insensitive to the very different style of *The American Scene*.³⁴ Moreover, Blair is concerned above all to establish the intricate relation between James's project and that of the progressives. She does not investigate precisely, within a text like *The American Scene*, when James parallels his contemporaries' ultimately reactionary impulses, when he departs from them, and why this should be so. While more concerned with the distinctiveness of James's vocabulary and tone, Haviland is somewhat *too* concerned to demonstrate the Jamesian difference. So consistently different, as this scholar describes it, is *The American Scene* from contemporaneous work that it manifests neither reactionary impulses, nor infelicitous imagery. In spite of dubbing *The American Scene* "James's most extensive and most explicit commentary on the presence of Jews in American life," Freedman's essay, finally, does not devote the attention to

34. Blair, "Documenting America," 270; *Henry James*, 7.

this text that would adequately demonstrate the accuracy of this scholar's crucial claim that James constructs the figure of the Jew "as one connected to filth, degeneration, decay."³⁵

Henry James and the "Aliens" relies on a more sustained engagement with *The American Scene* — as well as with vital moments in other relevant texts from late James, such as the Autobiography and the Prefaces — to argue that James's response to the ethnic other manifests the type of openness that Posnock claims for it only when, paradoxically, James manages to think of that other as overwhelmingly and impenetrably "alien," as a powerful "Presence" on the American scene to which the analytical and critical faculty must be surrendered. When the "alien" is thus "in possession of the scene," then James, surprisingly, derives from his own dispossessed situation not the xenophobic or antisemitic frustration that some critics have associated with it, but a real sense of enjoyment — the enjoyment that is felt by the person who relaxes the barriers of the self; who gives up, momentarily, on any "project" or "politics," whether those politics be reactionary (as I show James's predominantly to have been) or radical (as Posnock's "politics of nonidentity" suggests). This James allows himself to be subsumed by an American scene of which the "alien" seems to be the master; this James is pleasurably possessed by the scene. Yet when, more rarely, James, as an individual, tries to form a personal relation with one or a few ethnic others, when he tries to probe their distinctive character, then his response is determined by the reactionary, nativist, Anglo-Saxon basis of his judgment. In that case, he vies with his antagonist for the power to be in possession of the American scene. Taken together, the two responses to the "other" point to a sense of identity in James that displays a strong dynamic of mastery and surrender in which the nature of either self or other becomes impossible to fix. Instead, there is a continuum of identity — akin to the "criminal continuity" that James registers throughout the American scene — in which self and other, native and alien, subject and object adopt alternate roles of control and submission. Both are at times in possession of the American scene and possessed by that scene.

The first chapter, "Possessing the American Scene: Race and Vulgarity, Seduction and Judgment," undertakes a critical examination of the wide-spread assumption among many present-day proponents of cultural studies that those literary texts are to be commended in which a contestatory resistance to the dominant ideology can be detected. I argue that such a perspective may well be motivated by the gendered basis of

35. Freedman, 64.

our ideal of a political practice. Much criticism of *The American Scene* has been troubled by the seductive qualities of James's style, with its flourishes and indirections, conventionally thought of as feminine. "It's all very well to write beautifully," this argument goes, "but why didn't Henry James take a firm, manly stand against Jim Crow racism, as did his brother?" Those who have taken up the defence of James's record have mainly accepted the critics' "masculine" framework, but have argued that *The American Scene* does put up a manfully contestatory resistance to the dominant ideology in less easily visible ways.

If one accepts the terms of this debate, then the critics undoubtedly have a stronger case than the defenders. However, I rely on recent work in feminist political and moral philosophy to question the desirability of the type of contestation that is privileged by both sides. Open contestation, on this account, is not the best strategy for a democracy, because the latter is not ideally suited to coping with heavy polarisation. Democracy is better served when conflicts do not come to a head, but are instead defused by means of a careful use of language and of the ambiguous power that it possesses. Jamesian ambiguity and indirection fit in perfectly with such a democratic practice. I submit a number of key terms from *The American Scene* ("civilization," "consciousness," "vulgarity," "possession") to close scrutiny in order to establish their politically functional ambiguity. Contrary to what has been influentially claimed,³⁶ it proves impossible to contend that James systematically associates vulgarity with the "other" in ethnic and class terms. James's work does point to a direct link between vulgarity and "possession": the enjoyment of recently acquired power or material luxury. The title of the chapter alludes to such a sense of "possessing the American scene," which James's text, significantly, relates not only to the African American, but also to a range of white figures, such as the travelling salesman, and the American girl.

Chapter Two, "Consuming, Performing and Judging the American Scene," argues that James's late style causes him to participate at a rhetorical level in that alienation of the human subject that he overtly deplores in *The American Scene*. The sense of identity that thus emerges can be related in illuminating fashion to the two phases of capitalism that James's late work straddles. If James's pronouncements bespeak an older integrative model of selfhood that reflects the principles of accumulative capitalism (the self steadily grows by accumulating experience), his style performs the reality of a disintegrative selfhood that is more readily linked to the reproductive (or consumer) phase of capitalism (the self successively assumes various discontinuous forms). The economical

36. See Warren.

imagery that James employs reveals his simultaneous inscription in the two modes. These two prongs can also be fruitfully related to De Man's distinction between constative and performative uses of language. In *The American Scene*, James is motivated on the one hand by the (constative) desire to obtain insight into the essential character of things and people (including the ethnic other) — an essence that he tries to capture metaphorically. On the other hand, he manifests a (performative) enjoyment of his sensory perception of reality, undergone in all its metonymical “numerosity and quantity,” which he “rests in ... as an absolute luxury.” The American scene is sometimes regarded as a metaphor for an identifiable quality which the narrator has to ascertain; at other times as a stage on which he may enact a metonymical chain of contingent roles. I show how the accumulative and constative impulses predominate in the “Philadelphia” section of *The American Scene* (to which Seltzer devotes much attention in his critique), while the performative, consumer mode is most in evidence in the passages of James's text that deal with the New York multicultural scene (which Seltzer conveniently ignores).

Chapter Three, “Enjoying the American Scene: The Overpowering ‘Presence’ of Sites, Buildings and ‘Aliens,’” homes in on James's enjoyment of the immensity of the American scene. I highlight the continuity that exists for James among the various overwhelming “Presences” that he encounters — be they public monuments of impeccable Anglo-Saxon lineage like Philadelphia's Independence Hall, Harvard's Alumni Hall, or New York's Tomb of Ulysses S. Grant, or be they facts that would seem to meet less easily with the native-born American's respect, such as New York's “swarming” Jewish ghetto, or its Central Park, both equally dominated, for James, by the “alien” presence. Contrary to what has frequently been thought, James's observations on the immigrant in *The American Scene* do not simply express deep-seated feelings of nativist revulsion at the threat which the “alien” poses to the identity and material position of the American-born. If anything, the reverse is true. James has a deep imaginative need for the “alien” to act as that truly major facet of the American social landscape without which the latter would be unbearably void. In Philadelphia, a city that struck him as unmarked by any ethnic presence, there was Independence Hall to meet his professed desire for “the central something, the social *point de repère*.” In the several chapters devoted to New York, however, he can identify little apart from the ethnic other that could satisfy this craving of “consciousness,” gasping as it does, “in however empty an air, ... for a relation, as intimate as possible, to something ... round which its life may revolve.” As long as the “aliens” strike him as such a Presence, James willingly submits to their overpowering reality. Yet when they come across as individuals, endowed with consciousness and cultural

aspirations, then James's critical faculty is activated; he adopts a position of mastery, and his avowedly reactionary stance becomes evident.

Chapter Three also further extends my investigation of the two-pronged character of James's style, examining how the latter shifts attention from the usual focus on the key nouns of a sentence (the latter's key metaphors, we could say) to what could be termed the sentence's metonymical operators: particularly its prepositions and conjunctions, and those of its adverbs (and sometimes verbs) that indicate a relation, a contiguity, or a change that hinges on something else. I find that, in his conscious, rational, substantive mode, James often adopts a reactionary point of view which his unconscious, sensuous, transitive mode tends to deconstruct. At the substantive level, James at times communicates a nativist "ideal" while registering revulsion at "alienism." But at the transitive level, the negatively charged substantives are more likely to be embraced, while the positive ones are negatively transvalued. Or, in Freudian terms, a censorious superego regularly regrets the manifestation of ("substantive") social values whose Presence a desiring id cunningly manages to enlist ("transitively") for the production of (sensuous) joy. The Jamesian narrator enjoys the American scene best when he feels most completely subject to the transitive effect of a dominant presence such as the ethnic Other.

In Chapter Four, "Queering the American Scene: James's Obliquely Possessive Plottings of Desire," I question the preoccupation with homosexual characters and homoerotic relations that marks much recent criticism of James. My analysis of *The American Scene* shows that, while this work is almost wholly devoid of human "characters," nonetheless it is informed by an intense eroticism. The appropriate term for this erotic quality of James's text is "queer," but only if we disengage that term from any automatic link to the homoerotic. What we have, in *The American Scene* and elsewhere in James, is an eroticism that takes little or no interest in the nature of the object by which it is provoked. Whether that object has a male or a female sexual identity rarely matters — indeed, is frequently unclear. Moreover, once it has served as the basis for an erotic impulse, the object often proves curiously dispensable to the Jamesian imagination (for instance in the dream of the Louvre). The metaphors of homo- and heterosexuality cannot capture the metonymy of desire as it operates in Jamesian narrative.

Pursuing the line of inquiry that was begun in the previous chapters, I argue that James's eroticism feeds on the presence of an overwhelming other. What James seeks out is an object that is itself sufficiently masterful to appear to put up a resistance to Jamesian analytical and erotic mastery. It is this very resistance that at once invites and rebuffs the mastering impulse. When, as most often happens, the Jamesian narrator refrains from mastering the object that he is

contemplating or desiring, then his surrender of that type of mastery may in effect be regarded as the attainment of another, oblique form of possession. The desire for complete mastery is intentionally frustrated so that what ensues is a self-disseminating, laterally dispersed sensation in which surrender cannot be thought apart from mastery, in which possession inheres in the very fact of being possessed. Hence also the pun in the subtitle of my book: to be (actively) in possession of the American scene involves a willingness to allow oneself to come into the possession of that scene. The latter's overpowering Presence ensures the erotic joy, the *jouissance*, of the one who enters to the loss of all his identity.