Henry James and the (Un)Canny American Scene

A good starting-point for reflection on Henry James's response to his native American scene is the monograph *Hawthorne*, published in 1879, when James had been a writer for some 15 years and had just achieved his first public success with "Daisy Miller." The short book, published in Britain as a part of Macmillan's "English Men of Letters" series (Hawthorne was the only American subject, as was James the only American contributor), is still worth reading, but now strikes most readers as labouring under an anxiety of influence that caused its composer, just emerging as an important American writer in his own right, to overemphasize in Hawthorne a "provincialism that the self-styled cosmopolitan sought to escape" (Daugherty 1993: 28). In order to communicate that provincialism, James constructs a long list of all the things that "are absent from the texture of American life":

> "No State …. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot!" (James 1984a: 351-2).

Certainly, James is here contrasting the dearth of the landscape Hawthorne looked out upon to that "denser, richer, warmer European spectacle" he could have enjoyed (and which James himself did in fact enjoy) (James 1984a: 351). Yet, as the insistent anaphora suggests, there is a rhetorical excess in the list that should alert readers (but has not commonly done so) to its staged character. That James was not altogether serious in presenting this catalogue of supposed absences is betrayed by a number of

other facts as well. For one, its original occurs in James's notebook for 1879, but is there cooked up as something that "In a story, some one says": " 'Oh yes, the United States—a country without a sovereign, without a court … without an Epsom or an Ascot, an Eton or a Rugby . . . !!' "; perhaps the double exclamation marks on which the passage closes betray clearest of all that these are sentiments its author would not subscribe to in quite such a tone of voice (not to mention that Epsom, Ascot, Eton or Rugby are hardly sites that managed to fire the Jamesian imagination to any noticeable extent) (James 1987: 12). For another, the context in which the enumeration appears in *Hawthorne* rather qualifies its thrust. The introductory and concluding sentences reveal that, far from voicing its author's deeply-held convictions, the list constitutes James's attempt to have some fun at the expense of his native country and for the benefit of his intended English audience:

> The negative side of the spectacle on which Hawthorne looked out … might, indeed, with a little ingenuity, be made almost ludicrous; one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, ... (James 1984a: 351-2).

The modal disclaimers ("might," "almost," might," "should"), as well as the admission that some "ingenuity" is needed to arrive at a catalogue that would make the American spectacle seem nearly "ludicrous," are usually elided from reproductions of the list, as is the redemptive observation on which it concludes:

> Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life — especially in the American life of forty years ago, the effect of which, upon an English or a French imagination, would probably as a general thing be appalling. The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such an indictment,

> would be that if these things are left out, everything is left out. The American knows that a good deal remains; what it is that remains — that is his secret, his joke, as one may say. (James 1984a: 351-2).

Ensuring that his enumeration will come across as "ludicrous," "appalling," "almost lurid," James manages to attribute to an American imagination such as Hawthorne's a power that is both canny and uncanny. The American has to overcome greater odds, needs to draw on a greater fund of canniness, than did a contemporaneous English or French writer. What exactly it is that the American can draw on cannily stays "his secret," a *heimlich* secret about his home that is rendered all the more *unheimlich*, to activate the Freudian twin terms, by the rhetorical emphasis on the uncanny character, the "appalling" quality, of the American scene. However, it is not downright luridness that the sketch aims at, but merely the "almost lurid," saved from any confusion with the properly gothic by the "ludicrous" element that is present throughout, reminding us that something of a "joke" is involved in the whole affair.

Surprisingly, a similar stress on amusement marks James's characterization of the "sense of sin" in Hawthorne:

> Nothing is more curious and interesting than this almost exclusively *imported* character of the sense of sin in Hawthorne's mind; it seems to exist there merely for an artistic or literary purpose. …. It was a necessary condition for a man of Hawthorne's stock that if his imagination should take licence to amuse itself, it should at least select this grim precinct of the Puritan morality for its play-ground. (James 1984a: 363; emphasis in original)

The American scene of Hawthorne's time was, according to James, a scene of great innocence, which led its eminent literary inhabitant to select subjects for "their picturesqueness, their rich duskiness of colour, their chiaroscuro"; never as "the

expression of a hopeless, or even of a predominantly melancholy, feeling about the human soul. … He is to a considerable degree ironical …; but he is neither bitter nor cynical—he is rarely even what I would call tragical" (James 1984a: 364). Again, there is an uncanny dimension to Hawthorne's tales of Puritan morality, to be sure, but in James's view that dimension remains firmly in the grasp of a canny artistic command that selects subjects for their effect rather than allowing what is buried beneath the moral surface to structure the entire creative edifice.

Hawthorne died in 1864 and was unable to digest the full significance of the Civil War, though he was "horrified and depressed by it; it cut from beneath his feet the familiar ground which had long felt so firm, substituting a heaving and quaking medium in which his spirit found no rest" (James 1984a: 427). The imagery James here activates is suggestive of Freud's characterization of "the uncanny [*unheimlich*]" as "something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it" (Freud 1978: 245). In James's estimate, the Civil War "left a different tone from the tone it found …. It introduced into the national consciousness a certain sense of proportion and relation, of the world being a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed, the future more treacherous, success more difficult" (James 1984a: 427-8). James dwells extensively on how innocence left the American scene when the fact that had never cast more than "a faint shadow in the picture—the shadow projected by the 'peculiar institution' of the Southern States"—the repressed of American culture—finally managed to return and "darken the rosy vision of most good Americans" (James 1984a: 426). He goes on to use a Biblical metaphor that we will see recur, with interesting doublings and variations, in his later writings on the American scene: "At the rate at which things are going, it is obvious that good Americans will be more numerous than ever; but the

good American, in days to come, will be a more critical person than his complacent and confident grandfather. He has eaten of the tree of knowledge" (James 1984a: 428).

If the threat to Hawthornian innocence had emanated from the institution of slavery and the challenge to the Union that its controversial character constituted, for James himself, returning to the United States in 1904 after an absence that he recalled as having lasted nearly a quarter century (it was actually twenty-one years), the test came first and foremost from the "inconceivable alien" with whom it was his "American fate to share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism" (James 1993: 426-7). Comments such as these, taken from James's travelogue *The American Scene* (1907), and apparently voiced by "a more critical person" than "complacent and confident" Hawthorne, have increasingly occupied the forefront of scholarly attention to James in an age of cultural studies. The MLA Bibliography now lists 86 items that discuss this work of James's, 45 of which were published in the past ten years; 18 between 1981 and 1994; 13 in the 25 years prior to 1980. While there is a general increase in research on James, the 340 items on *The Portrait of a Lady*, say, are less strikingly concentrated in the recent past: 116 since 1995; 134 between 1981 and 1994; 90 prior to 1980. *The American Scene* is a book that consists of fourteen chapters recording James's impressions of New England, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Charleston and Florida, ten of which had first appeared as essays in the periodicals *North American Review*, *Harper's Magazine* and *Fortnightly Review.* In the course of his year-long tour of the United States, during which he gave lectures that "more than covered" his expenses (James 1993: 805), James also visited Chicago, St. Louis,

Indianapolis and the west coast, but his response to these sites remained unchronicled, except for some scattered comments in his notebooks (see James 1987: 234-43).

Two main strands may be distinguished in the reception of James's *American Scene*, which can be usefully summarized by pointing to two influential studies that appeared in the early phase of this intensified interest, in both of which the travelogue featured prominently. Yet, before explaining what sets these interpretations apart, it is imperative to note that they (and the other analyses they are here taken to represent) share a vital belief in the seriousness of James's endeavour. It is the self-identified "restless analyst" of the American scene that recent scholarship has set out to question or defend. After reviewing some of the major work that has been devoted to this effort, I will go on to explore the possibility that James is at his most fascinating not in his guise of that "more critical person" who has lost any trace of Hawthornian innocence, but when he more closely corresponds with his own version of his august predecessor and displays in his travelogue a similarly playful, joyous rhetorical distance from his subject.

In *Henry James and the Art of Power* (1984) Mark Seltzer posits that "James's techniques of representation discreetly reproduce social modes of policing and regulation and reproduce them the more powerfully in their very discretion, in the very gesture of disowning the shame of power" (139). Desire, in James, is "the occasion for mastery to be exerted" (Seltzer 1984: 141). Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity* (1991), by contrast, pursues "James's surrender to urban experience" (154). James's is a "self of the 'margin,' a realm comprised of 'immense fluidity.' .... A zone of uncertainty, the margin is a veritable quicksand engulfing all pretensions to mastery, control, and stable identity" (Posnock 1991: 88). Thus, James's account of one of the phenomena that he finds most strikingly American is assessed very

differently by these critics: the "amazing hotel-world," first broached in the guise of New York's Waldorf-Astoria (James 1993: 440). Seltzer and Posnock both focus on the "master-spirits of management" that James imagines gingerly but potently operating behind the scenes for the benefit of the guests' enjoyment (James 1993: 444). Seltzer emphasizes the disciplinary aspect of this subtle exertion of power and James's complicity in such strategies of veiled but no less violent management: "Like the novelist whose narrative authority is at once omniscient and immanent, the presiding power [of the hotel world] exerts a comprehensive supervision over his characters while perpetuating the ruse of their freedom" (Seltzer 1984: 114). Posnock attempts to dissociate the author from these master-spirits: James considers it a "plague upon the American scene" that there are no "checks on the workings of the 'hotel-spirit'"; he consistently rejects the "conception of man as a kind of puppet, of the sort that [he] encountered at the Waldorf"; and "James's manipulations, after all, [serve to make] freedom more than mere illusion and experience more than dissimulation" (Posnock 1991: 23, 258, 248).

These two strands—one stressing Jamesian (reactionary) mastery, the other Jamesian (liberal) surrender—can be recognized in many of the studies that have been devoted to *The American Scene* before and since Seltzer's and Posnock's books. They emerge at their clearest when the narrator's response to ethnic others is considered. In 1963, Maxwell Geismar claimed that James fervently hoped for a knight who would "combat [the immigrant,] this ominous and threatening menace to *his* American scene" (350; emphasis in original). No one came to the rescue, "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" (350). Slights like these have been repeated by more recent critics. Przybylowicz in 1986 imputed to

James an unconscious desire for "some ultimate solution which would remove the aliens from the scene" (259). More recent critics have been far more balanced in their critique (for a survey, see Buelens 2002: 23-32, 50-52, 74-6).

Most of the recent work, though, has tended to stress James's liberal stance in varying degrees. Writing a little earlier than Posnock, William Boelhower had briefly propounded essentially the same thesis with regard to James and the "aliens," finding 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" (1987: 23). In *Henry James's Last Romance* Beverly Haviland finds *The American Scene* to be very different from contemporaneous writing, whose reactionary impulses and infelicitous imagery are far more glaring. She situates James's relation to the sociocultural other in the context of the social theories that were being developed by Peirce, Veblen, Du Bois and Riis. Haviland moreover stresses that James did not return to the country of his birth "as a native but as an alien," and she argues that the Jews stand as an "encourag[ing]" example for James: they have "escaped falling prey to ... typical American dangers ... by holding on to a sense of their past, by making continuity crucial to their ethnic identity" (1997: 135, 152-3). Sara Blair, too, has contextualized *The American Scene* very broadly. She agrees with Posnock that "*The American Scene* attempts to create a space of cultural agency and production beyond the reach of bourgeois and progressive expertise," yet 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": if James cannot escape from the practice of "extending linked idioms of racial panic and progressivism, …. 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" (Blair 1996: 13-14). In his discussion of "Henry James and the discourses of antisemitism" Jonathan Freedman zooms in on certain moments in *The American Scene* (which he identifies as the central Jamesian text on the topic) which "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" (1986: 67). Freedman eloquently argues 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" (1986: 79). Freedman's essay also covers a wide range of contemporaneous eugenicist material that allows him to conclude that James's antisemitism, while showing disturbing parallels, was relatively gentle in comparison.

The studies by Haviland, Blair and Freedman offer detailed and much-needed contextualization of James's response to the American scene at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet, the considerable amount of space that is set aside in these works for examination of contemporary material leaves less room for that close analysis of James's words, sentences, and paragraphs that may be just as essential to a proper assessment of his perspective on the ethnic other, and that may bring to light the canny way in which he manipulates rhetorical effect. For instance, Blair's frequent emphasis on James's "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* (Blair 1997: 7), while, 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 does not devote the attention to this text that would adequately demonstrate the accuracy of this scholar's crucial claim that, "[i]nflating 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." (Freedman 1986: 64, 79).

Thus, the passage on the "inconceivable alien" deserves to be considered in more detail than I have so far devoted to it. Here it is in full:

> I think indeed that the simplest account of the action of Ellis Island on the spirit of any sensitive citizen who may have happened to "look in" is that he comes back from his visit not at all the same person that he went. He has eaten of the tree of knowledge, and the taste will be for ever in his mouth. He had thought he knew before, thought he had the sense of the degree in which it is his American fate to share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism, with the inconceivable alien; but the truth had never come home to him with any such force. In the lurid light projected upon it by those courts of dismay it shakes him—or I like at least to imagine it shakes him—to the depths of his being; I like to think of him, I positively *have* to think of him, as going about ever afterwards with a new look, for those who can see it, in his face, the outward sign of the new chill in his heart. So is stamped, for detection, the questionably privileged person who has had an apparition, seen a ghost in his supposedly safe old house. Let not the unwary, therefore, visit Ellis Island. (James 1993: 426-27; emphasis in original)

Clearly, this passage adopts an "American" perspective, where the term "American" excludes the immigrant, sharply marginalized as "the inconceivable alien" whose disturbance of the "sanctity of [the American's] consciousness" turns Ellis Island into veritable "courts of dismay." Several critics have found these comments problematic. In spite of holding up *The American Scene* as a blueprint of what pragmatic openness to the reality of ethnic interaction could look like, Boelhower registers the narrator's visit to Ellis Island as a counter-instance. "Henry James ... left the scene with a metaphysical *feritas* ...' What caused 'the new chill in his heart' was knowledge that he had 'to share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism, with the inconceivable alien'" (1987: 18).

Yet, for a number of reasons, we should not take the extract at face value. Rather, we should note the many parallels to the rhetorical excess that characterized James's comments on the (un)canny American scene in *Hawthorne*. If, first of all, the earlier text employed anaphora of the word "No" to create an unrelenting effect in its list of things that are missing from America, here it is the word "American" that is repeated more insistently than seems warranted by the demands of stylistic elegance: "the degree in which it is his American fate to share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism." If, in *Hawthorne*, James invokes the Biblical figure of the "tree of knowledge" to mark the effect of the Civil War, here that same figure indicates the loss of innocence experienced by Americans who realize that their country is being shaped to the core by new immigrants: "He has eaten of the tree of knowledge, and the taste will be for ever in his mouth." And when James talks of "the lurid light projected ... by those courts of dismay," we should remind ourselves of "the almost lurid light" that was cunningly projected by his humorous "indictment" of the supposed poverty of the American scene in *Hawthorne*

(James 1993: 352). The ominous imperative on which the passage ends—"Let not the unwary, therefore, visit Ellis Island"—serves to bring the segment's auxesis to a properly portentous conclusion.

Indeed, the passage on the "inconceivable alien" is qualified quite as much as was James's earlier critique of America by rhetorical complexity. Notice the two very odd clauses which create a distinct distance between narrator ("I") and subject ("he," i.e. "any sensitive citizen"). The unpleasant "truth" which is brought home to the citizen "shakes him," the Jamesian narrator claims, "to the depths of his being"; "or I like at least to imagine it shakes him," he surprisingly intersperses. Similarly, when he goes on to say: "I like to think of him ... as going about ever afterwards with a new look, ... the outward sign of the new chill in his heart," the first elision embraces the narrator's unexpected exhortation to himself: "I positively *have* to think of him [in this manner]." In both cases, there seems to be room for doubt, and the narrator's decision to adopt the chosen point of view is one that is highly conscious and somewhat artificial: he needs to convince even himself that this is the correct way "to think of [the sensitive citizen]" just as he needs to insist on the "American" citizenship of that person. There is a distancing at work in these interpolations that betrays a self-awareness of the staging that is taking place—that brings to the fore its performative dimension—and that heightens the force of the incrementum that marks the passage.

Furthermore, the extract's penultimate sentence strongly suggests that James was already toying with the germ of his uncanny story "The Jolly Corner," on which he began work just a few months later. James's active dramatizing of the "action of Ellis Island on the spirit of any sensitive citizen" in the nonfictional *American Scene* may well have much in common with the effects he seeks in his fictional ghost stories

and tales of the supernatural. As he puts it in the Preface to the New York Edition of stories like "The Jolly Corner," "[often,] in quest … of the amusing, I have invoked the horrific" (James 1984b: 1260). This is true too of several moments in *The American Scene* whose remarkable rhetoric it is above all that stops the cultural commentary from remaining stuck at the level of reactionary response that could be derived from such isolated observations as an appreciative one on the value of the country club ("the ample, spreading, galleried house, hanging over the great river, with its beautiful largeness of provision for associated pleasures" [James 1993: 622]), or a censuring one on the effect of Jewish immigrants on the English language ("one stared at this all-unconscious impudence of the agency of future ravage" wreaked by "this immensity of the alien presence climbing higher and higher" [James 1993: 470]). If *The American Scene* merely contrasted such positive and negative values in all seriousness, it would be the product of that "more critical person" only that James implicitly aspired to be when he distanced himself from Hawthornian innocence. Yet, the truly interesting James that we most enjoy reading is the one who continues to practise what he attributed to Hawthorne these many years ago and mirrored in his own discourse: the canny art of manipulating the uncanny, never allowing the latter to descend into the tragic, by virtue of the playfulness that is always retained in the writing's rhetorical excess, its staged quality, its hyperperformativity.

A crucial dimension of this performative dimension is the doubling between the native-born and the foreign-born in *The American Scene*. It is in that sense that the passage on the "inconceivable alien" becomes truly uncanny, since the ghost in the house is a foreign ghost that claims a shared identity with the American, claims an equal right to take up an abode in the safe old house. According to Freud, uncanny experiences are "all concerned with the phenomenon of the 'double', which appears

in every shape and in every degree of development [and can be] marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own" (Freud 1978: 234). Thus, ruminating "the great 'ethnic' question," James wonders: "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 ...?" (James 1993: 459). Indeed, James's own "native" status is a rather questionable one. He often labels himself the "restored absentee," a cognomen that reminds the reader of his scant right to claim the country of his birth as truly his and of the near-interchangeability of his own identity with that of the "aliens" (James 1993: 457).

James's return to the United States in 1904-05 not only resulted in the fourteen chapters of *The American Scene*, but also in three related texts. "The Question of Our Speech" was first delivered in 1905 as an address to the graduating class at Bryn Mawr, the Pennsylvania women's college. The two other, longer essays, "The Speech of American Women" and "The Manners of American Women," are elaborations upon the lecture, and were published in the women's periodical *Harper's Bazar* in 1907.

The essays argue that there is a need for constraints in order for a society to function properly. Such constraints are in plentiful evidence in Europe, yet are as good as absent from the America that James is visiting. The fact that American men hardly figure on the American social scene—restricting themselves instead to the business world—is not just problematic in its own right, but also amounts to an abdication of their responsibility to afford "the woman, as a social creature, her lead

and her cue" (James 1999: 110). It is easy to read these essays as so many instances of conservative cultural criticism, emphasizing as they do the need not just for distinctions, but for hierarchies: "The [American] soil has undergone, for the plant of the fine individual life, none of the preparation of the grinding, the trampling, the packing into it of other lives, lives resigned to a mere subsidiary and contributive function" (James 1999: 62).

Pierre A. Walker's introduction to a collection that has made these essays newly available in print resists such a reading. It highlights rather how, for one part, the essays on speech anticipate structuralist linguistics in their insistence on "the mutual dependence of consonants and vowels upon each other and the importance of distinguishing—discriminating—between variations of sound" (James 1999: xxxi). However, linguistics has moved on from the structuralist paradigm to include sociolinguistic insights that seem just as relevant to James's statements. Thus, when he expresses irritation in "The Question of Our Speech" over the fact that present-day Americans say "arrt" instead of "art," he is displaying an ignorance of the sociohistorically documentable distribution of rhoticity over the map of English as a world language (James 1999: 50). In fact, the rhotic accent (pronouncing the "r" in a word like art) is not something that emerged in the United States, but that was brought to the country by the colonists who settled in the Chesapeake Bay area, most of whom came from the west of England, where the accent was standard. Ironically, far from being a debased form of English, as James would have it, this variety of English, David Crystal notes in his *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, is "sometimes said to be the closest we will ever get to the sound of Shakespearean English" (1995: 93). James's assumption that "arrt" constitutes a development away from "art" is probably based on the fact that he was most familiar as a child with the

speech of New England, whose original settlers came from the east of England, where the "r" was commonly dropped after a vowel. Due to the accident of geographical proximity to the centre of Empire, this accent and its peculiar elisionary practices had obtained the status of "Received Pronunciation" in Britain by the time that James was domiciled there (Crystal 1995: 365).

Walker further points out that James's sharp criticism of women in these essays does not reflect a sexist bias, but rather springs from his attempt to take upon himself "the role that American men have abandoned, making himself the 'real' man, the kind of man who can set a corrective example, which in turn incites women to further corrections of their own" and to balancing corrections of the men (1999: xxxiii). This is a useful statement, but it will not persuade all students of James that we should continue to read this work. The fascination of an essay like "The Speech of American Women" may more clearly lie in the way it enacts what it argues, rather than in the argument itself. When James identifies American women's freedom to behave as they please as a key problem, then he is unlikely to command the attention of many present-day readers. His reiteration of the, to him, amazing fact that American women have nothing to fear seems quaint, to say the least (James 1999: 59-63). What proves more precious to a twenty-first-century Jamesian is the final section, in which the essay stages an encounter with one young woman, who is strangely prepared to engage in conversation on the subject of her own alleged deprivation of anything like a proper standard of English (James 1999: 75-81). The appeal of this portion does not emanate from the debate it reproduces on the subject of the "tongueless slobber or snarl or whine," the "debased coinage," that James charges her with employing (James 1999: 76), but from the manner in which he eventually seems to be instilling in his interlocutor precisely that fear that the opening section had

diagnosed as the missing element in the composition of the American woman's existence.

"My victim had at last gathered herself—I saw the end of our passage," James informs us, indicating that little time is left to conclude his assault on this "victim" of his (James 1999: 80). When she challenges him with the "great card" she had had, "all the while, up her sleeve"—" 'Why is it, then, that, all the world over, people so admire us just as we are?' "—he is thrilled to find himself so magisterially prepared:

> "Because, designated as I admit you all to have been for a remarkable fate, it was needful you should see certain things apparently done, you should feel certain illusions created, you should be blind to the baiting of certain traps, that are all part and parcel of the fulfilment of your destiny. This destiny you *are* carrying out, to the joy of the ironic gods—who have locked you up, as an infatuated, innumerable body, a warning to the rest of the race, in perhaps the very best-appointed of all the fools' paradises they have ever insidiously prepared for humanity." (James 1999: 81)

If the staged quality of the passage on the "inconceivable alien" in *The American Scene* owed much of its appeal to the ghost in the house it invoked in anticipation of "The Jolly Corner," the intertext here is clearly James's 1903 story "The Beast in the Jungle," with its protagonist who was to "suffer" his "fate," not to "know" it (James 1996: 531). John Marcher's special destiny is said to be "in the lap of the gods" in that tale (James 1996: 513), and he spends his entire life awaiting the event that will vindicate his belief that he is exceptional, only to realize at the very end that he had in fact "justified his fear and achieved his fate; he had failed, with the last exactitude, of all he was to fail of": "he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened" (James 1996: 540). In "The Speech of American

Women" James comes close to casting his young interlocutor in the role of John Marcher, imputing to her a similar blindness to the special destiny that she is fulfilling, and emphasizing her powerlessness to escape that fate. "My friend gave me, for this, one of her longest stares"—as well she might!—"and I am not sure that, under the effect of my words, she had not really turned pale," James continues (1999: 81). What he is in effect doing is exerting that psychological pressure on the young woman that he had noted at the outset of the essay is wholly missing from American society, "as it is of the nature of the different parts of old and dense civilizations to press—and to press especially where weakness and sensibility prevail," so that a proper sense of "fear" might be produced (James 1999: 59).

Yet in an unusual twist that again pleasantly reminds us of James in his uncanny-fictional rather than culture-critical mode, a possibility of escape is held out to the young woman after all, with James himself tantalizingly holding the key that might unlock the prison-house of language to which she has been condemned. " 'Locked us up—?'" the bewildered woman asks. " 'Yes, for I doubt if, within any measurable time, you'll be able, as an imprisoned mass, to get out; …. Still, I won't answer for it that there may not be here and there hope of escape for individuals,'" he encouragingly confides to his auditor. "I had spoken in such evident good faith," he comments, "that I made her out at last as touched with dismay" (James 1999: 81). We do well briefly to recall the "courts of dismay" that Ellis Island had presented to the American citizen, and the extent to which a "chill" was struck in that person's heart by what he had to witness there. Here it is James himself who, in perfect good faith, is setting about to cause dismay in the feelings of a young American, who "could only echo: 'Hope—?'" and have him rejoin: " 'Yes, of your perhaps quietly slipping out

one by one'" (James 1999: 81). Here it is James, too, who imparts the chill of his own breath rather than undergoing any such horrific effect:

> And then as, distinctly, alarm had stirred in her at the chill of my breath, "You want to know how that may be managed?" I asked. "Well, by letting me just hover at the gate and have speech of you when you steal away. Only look for the gleam of my lantern, and meet me by this low postern. I'll take care of the rest." (James 1999: 81)

The essay ends on this monologic note, leaving readers to conjecture that James may well have been entirely successful in his rhetorical strategy, and that the young woman has finally fled the scene in horrified fear—precisely that fear whose absence Part One of the essay had pointed to as the defining mark of women in the American democracy.

The interest of a moment like this is considerable, yet rare in these essays. When James, say, invokes the "tree of knowledge" metaphor in "The Manners of American Women" he does so with less narrative subtlety than in *The American Scene*, where we saw the image play a crucial role in the production of a hyperbolic sense of the ethnic uncanny that culminated in the exclamation "Let not the unwary, therefore, visit Ellis Island!" (James 1993: 427). In the essay, the knowledge that is being tasted is knowledge of the lack of manners of young American women, whose pampered state has made them take for granted any service rendered to them. The scene that illustrates this finding takes place in Europe, where James had taken part in a bicycle trip. Two bicycles broke down and were "promptly, even if a little awkwardly," restored to working order by a young American male member of the party (James 1999: 111). The first belonged to a European young woman: "I was

struck by the charming tone of the explicit and insistent tribute of thanks rendered to this slight service"; the second to an American:

> she dropped him, as she remounted, a thin, short, perfunctory "Thanks" which had the effect of making our eyes, his and mine, the next moment, meet in wondering intelligence. … She was blind, she was deaf, to the stops of the social pipe, and its broken fragments seemed to crunch under her as she passed. All of which sudden perception was, dimly, dawningly, in the eyes of our bewildered swain, who struck me as having for the first time, poor youth, really tasted of the tree of knowledge. He had caught a snatch of the finer music, and I have asked myself repeatedly since, what it is that restored to his native order, he must have begun to fancy he misses. (James 1999: 111-12)

While this little vignette, with which the essay ends, is certainly a memorable one, it does not possess any of the self-distancing that could be observed in the rhetorically rich equivalent passage in *The American Scene*. If eating from the tree of knowledge there is an experience that "shakes" the narrator "to the depths of his being," we must recall how that observation is qualified by the interpolation "or I like at least to imagine it shakes him" and how the passage ends on a distinctly uncanny note (James 1993: 426). Any doubling that could be said to take place is restricted to the narrator's attribution to the "swain" of a shared knowledge, which with him is as yet dim and dawning, so that the narrator's is by implication clear and achieved—the knowledge possessed by the (conservative) cultural critic. There is little trace of the uncanny here.

I want to conclude this overview of James's engagement with the American scene with a present-day doubling that adds a fascinating dimension to the discussion.

In "The Question of Our Speech" James had warned his audience that they should be vigilant over the state of their language:

> All the while we sleep the vast contingent of aliens whom we make welcome, and whose main contention … is that, from the moment of their arrival, they have just as much property in our speech as we have, and just as good a right to do what they choose with it …: all the while we sleep the innumerable aliens are sitting up (*they* don't sleep!) to work their will on their new inheritance ... (James 1999: 55)

These immigrants to American shores have "the sublime consciousness … of speaking, of talking, for the first time in their lives, *really* at their ease." They enjoy "an infinite uplifting sense of freedom and facility" and what "they may best do is play, to their heart's content, with the English language" (James 1999: 54).

Cynthia Ozick has carefully engaged with James's argument here, gently introducing into her reading that ethnic double which is not, in "The Question of Our Speech," allowed to assume a **savingly ghostly character**. James gave his address at Bryn Mawr, Ozick notes, "exactly one year and two days before my mother, nine years old," arrived in New York (1989: 151). "My mother was an immigrant child, the poorest of the poor. She had come in steerage; she knew not a word of English when she stepped off the horsecar into Madison Street; she was one of the innumerable unsleeping aliens" (1989: 160). Ozick points out the misguidedness of James's critique:

> the "aliens," hard-pressed by the scramblings of poverty and cultural confusions, had no notion at all of linguistic "freedom and facility," took no witting license with the English tongue, and felt no remotest ownership in the

> language they hoped merely to earn their wretched bread by. If they did not sleep, it was because of long hours in the sweatshops …. (Ozick 1989: 154)

Tracing the process by which her mother was successfully introduced to the English language, Ozick is able to demonstrate James's deep limitation as a social theorist. Exhorting the young women in his audience to imitate models of tasteful speech (James 1999: 56), he never offers them any advice on which models to adopt. Who exactly is it that should be emulated? "The absence of models," Ozick states, "was not simply an embarrassment." "It should have hinted at the necessary relinquishment of *who* [the mode of the novel of manners] in favor of *what* [the mode of social theory]: not who appoints the national speech, but what creates the standard" (1989: 158). Never having received any public schooling in the United States, James misses the point that is obvious to the child of Russian Jewish immigrants: it is not by imitating models of speech that a correct command of the English language is achieved; it is by being submerged from as young an age as possible in the riches print culture has to offer. Ozick quotes Scott's "Lady of the Lake," an early set text of her mother's at P.S. 131 on the Lower East Side. "She never forgot it. She spoke of it all her life. Mastering it was the triumph of her childhood [and] enduringly typified achievement, education, culture" (1989: 159). To consent to become an American is to be prepared to adjust one's imagination to the assumptions inherent in the texts that shape the nation's culture. "Reading governs speech, governs tone, governs manner and manners civilization" (Ozick 1989: 168).

Inserting herself into the position of the ethnic alien who is relegated to the outside of James's argument in "The Question of Our Speech," Ozick is able to show up the limitations of his achievement as a social theorist or cultural critic. As I have argued in the course of this piece, James's reflections on the American scene take on a

greater interest when he adopts the mode of the novel of manners, cannily enacting roles whose uncanny dimensions are welcomed rather than avoided. Ozick finds it "striking beyond anything that James left out, in the course of his lecture, any reference to reading" and that he failed to realize that "immigrants who learned to read learned to speak," whereas "[t]hose who only learned to speak did not, in effect, learn to speak" (1989: 155). She does not come up with any possible explanation for this strange oversight. Perhaps, though, in focusing his critique of America so strongly on the failures of its oral culture, James was testifying to the depth of the trauma that he carried with him ever since 1895, when he had been booed on the London stage as the failed author of a play—that venture into aural culture of his? Maybe that is the true ghost vainly seeking entry into James's essays on the speech and manners of American women: the Master's ultimate inability to accept that he too is a finite human being, with a limited existential, national and even artistic range.

Bibliography

Blair, Sara. *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation*. New York: Cambridge UP. Enthusiastic, enticing account of James's documentary and contestatory project in his writing on the American progressive era.

Boelhower, William. 1987. *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature*. New York: Oxford UP. Good on the detail of Jamesian style that lends his response to the multicultural scene theoretical interest.

Buelens, Gert. *Henry James and the "Aliens": In Possession of the American Scene*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002. Shows how James derives mastery from the very act of surrendering to the mass of "aliens" on the American scene.

Caramello, Charles. 1993. “The duality of *The American Scene*.” In Daniel M. Fogel (Ed.). *A Companion to Henry James Studies* (pp. 447-73). Westport: Greenwood. Thorough and balanced survey of the significance of James’s travelogue, and of its reception up to the late 1980s.

Crystal, David. 1995. *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Daugherty, Sarah B. 1993. “James as critic and self-critic.” In Daniel M. Fogel (Ed.). *A Companion to Henry James Studies* (pp. 25-37). Westport: Greenwood.

Freedman, Jonathan. 1996. “Henry James and the discourses of antisemitism.” In Bryan Cheyette (Ed.). *Between 'Race' and Culture: Representations of 'the Jew' in English and American Literature* (pp. 62-83). Stanford: Stanford UP. Sophisticated, mainly psychoanalytical, discussion of what is seen as James’s complex relation to anti- *and* philosemitism.

Freud, Sigmund. 1978. *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (1917-19)*. Standard Edition. Vol. 17. London: Hogarth.

Geismar, Maxwell. 1963. *Henry James and the Jacobites*. Boston: Houghton. The classic attack on James’s reputation, stressing his immense egotism.

Haviland, Beverly. 1997. *Henry James's Last Romance: Making Sense of the Past and the American Scene*. New York: Cambridge UP. Strong defense of James’s sociopolitical stance in the fourth phase of his writing.

James, Henry. 1984a. *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*. Ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson. New York: Library of America.

James, Henry. 1984b. *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*. Ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson. New York: Library of America.

James, Henry. 1987. *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*. Ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers. Oxford: Oxford UP.

James, Henry. 1993. *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*. Ed. Richard Howard. New York: Library of America.

James, Henry. 1996. "The Beast in the Jungle." *Complete Stories, 1898-1910*. Ed. Denis Donoghue. New York: Library of America.

James, Henry. 1999. *Henry James on Culture: Collected Essays on Politics and the American Social Scene*. Ed. Pierre A. Walker. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P.

Ozick, Cynthia. 1989. "The question of our speech: the return to aural culture." In *Metaphor & Memory: Essays* (pp. 146-72). New York: Knopf. Sensitive response to "The Question of Our Speech," questioning several of its assumptions.

Posnock, Ross. 1991. *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*. New York: Oxford UP. Deeply influential account of James's wide-eyed openness to urban experience.

Przybylowicz, Donna. *Desire and Repression: The Dialectic of Self and Other in the Late Works of Henry James*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P. Argues that James was utterly unable to deal with cultural otherness in *The American Scene*.

Seltzer, Mark. 1984. *Henry James and the Art of Power*. Ithaca: Cornell UP. Highly intelligent Foucaultian reading of Jamesian technique as complicit with, yet in overt denial of, the machinery of power, e.g. in America.

Tanner, Tony. 1995. *Henry James and the Art of Nonfiction.* Athens: U of Georgia P.

Lucid, short, elegant study of James's achievement outside fiction.

Proposed indexing terms:

The American Scene

"The Question of Our Speech"

"The Speech of American Women"

"The Manners of American Women"

"Hawthorne" (or Hawthorne, Nathaniel)

(un)canny

race (and/or ethnicity and/or antisemitism)

nation (and/or United States)

gender (and/or sexuality)

performativity

culture

GERT BUELENS