

America by Instalment: Henry James's Perception of Nation and Change in The American Scene

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Abstract

In his “Matthew Arnold” (1884), James declared that “nationality is eminently a matter of form,” which directly recalls Benedict Anderson’s definition of nation as “an imagined community” and which also relates to Lauren Gail Berlant’s idea of the “fantasy-work of national identity” and “the National Symbolic.” After an absence of twenty-one years, James’s return to America was a challenge to test the effect of change on his Europhile consciousness. In his travelogue *The American Scene* (1907), he associates change with the dissipation of the serenity of the past and envisions it as a phenomenon of “chaos and confusion” (2), especially when the idea of “nation” is at stake. He insists that this supreme idea ought to be cherished as incontrovertible, conclusive, and unassailable and warns that too many alterations of it will ultimately make it wane. To him, the permutation in his conception of nation is a “profane overhauling” (67) and an endurance of an “indignity of change” (67). In this paper, I explore James’s highly idiosyncratic acceptance/resistance of change with regard to the concept of nation. I will argue that the missing signifiers in the American scene led him to attempt a complicated reification of the abstractions of nationalism in order to compensate for the meaning loss generated by a long severance from national bonds.

On landing at Hoboken at the end of August, 1904, James’s first impressions were chiefly centred on the extent of change in America. His encounter with continuous change confirmed his preconceptions about the endless possibilities and mutations which made his country “perpetually provisional.” By the end of *The American Scene*, he would apostrophize America, chiding her for her ceaseless transformations: “You are not final... you are not even definite... you are as yet but an instalment, a current number, like that of the morning paper, a specimen of a type in course of serialization—like the hero of the magazine novel, by the highly-successful author, the climax of which is still far off” (300).

James figures change more as “alteration” than as “development”; he represents it as synonymous with “positive ravage” (162) because, in his view, it inflicts “the sense of... rupture” (170-1) with the serenity of the past. His continuous reference to “cold change,” “the dreadful chill of change” (172), the “harshness of change” (169), and the “demoralized conversion of the soul of Nature” (224-5) all indicate the parallax quality of his perception of change. He in fact avows that “the change of impression on one’s coming from other places, is of the most marked” (257).

In his classic essay about the meaning of nation, Ernest Renan says that a nation “presupposes a past” and is “summarized...in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent...” A nation’s existence, he continues, is “a daily plebiscite” (19). It is this consent that James misses in America. He laments the fact that “Extent and reduplication, the multiplication of cognate items and the continuity of motion” are all elements that work

against “intercourse and contact” and that make the country “too large for any human convenience” (93). To press this idea further, James engages in “imaginative geography,” by enacting what Edward Said calls, a “poetic process” that renders the “vacant” and “anonymous” intelligible (*Orientalism* 55).¹ To account for the alteration which affected Boston, for example, he surmises that since it is common that “states of mind alter,” Boston “wasn’t a place, but a state of mind”; Philadelphia, on its part, “wasn’t a place, but a state of consanguinity, which is an absolute final condition” (205). This is what grants Philadelphia a special sense of permanence when compared to other places. In Renan’s sense, James appreciates the ingredients of societal “consent” which give this particular city the homogeneity and continuity for which he strives: “Philadelphia, manifestly, was beyond any other American city, a society, and was going to show as such, as a thoroughly confirmed and settled one” (205, emphasis James’s).

In contrast to change which James regards with mistrust, continuity gives him the assurance to reencounter the sense of the “precious past” as he everywhere calls it. At Newport, for example, he resuscitates the old memories of the leisured life of the past and openly expresses his preference for “the constant elements... that have persisted more than changed” (163). He designates continuity as a “backward extension” (179) and associates it with “responsibility,” “transmission” (12), “sensibility,” “piety,” “consistency,” and “serenity” (207).

The manifestations of modernity in America work to accentuate James’s anxieties about the brutal unmaking of History. “Architecture,” as Walter Benjamin argues, “has never been idle,”; “Its history is more ancient than that of any other art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art” (195). James’s observations about the New York sky scrapers as “giants of the mere market” as well as his indignant remarks on the architectural flaws of “the terrible town” in which “architecture goes by the board” (102), translate his preoccupation with the triad of history-art-people. His rejection of the sky-scrappers escorts his misgivings about America’s irreverent treatment of History and tradition: He condemns the “expensively provisional” “growths” which lack the least “authority of permanence” and accentuate the “essentially invented state” of America (60-1).

The poor imitative reproductions of European art are also to James manifestations of America’s “invented state.” He is haunted by the absence of taste and by the excessively ornamented replication of European architectural models. The Library of Congress “glitters in fresh and almost unmannerly emulation” and has a “frivolous irrelevance of form” (260). The marble manikins at Capitol Hill attest to “the immense amount of vulgar [and] barbaric decoration” (266). Although the new wings of the Capitol give him aesthetic satisfaction and conjure up “the noble effect” of the symmetrical buildings of the Parisian Rue Royale and Place de la Concorde, they dominate the American scene not in the majesty of the French edifices but in a “playhouse gallery fashion”(267).

Walter Benjamin’s analysis of authenticity and reproduction seems helpful in explaining James’s instinctive rejection of the poor imitative reproductions of European art:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object (324).

The houses on Fifth Avenue shine with the “lurid light of ‘business,’” and are far removed from the “majestic continuity and heredity” (121). James places high value on the past and on the power of European travel to provide aesthetic and intellectual edification. He urges the idea that Europe could provide Americans with the “absent things” that made their environment poor in comparison with that of the Old World. He complains that in America, the “aesthetic appetite” “long richly fed elsewhere... goes unassuaged” (280). It is in the essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne (1879) that James enumerates “the absent things in American life” and justifies his expatriation. In fact, he disapproved of America on the basis that it had “no state, in the European sense of the word,” “barely a specific national name.” James goes on with his inventory of American deficiencies to highlight his belief that the “complex social machinery,” the “accumulation of history and custom” and the “complexity of manners and types” existing in Europe are alone capable of “set[ting] a writer in motion” (“Hawthorne” 351, 320). Thus, he laments a most spectacular lack of the signs of civilization:

No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentleman, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor personages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities, or 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! (“Hawthorne” 351-2).

This inventory of absences not only indicates James’s aesthetic misgivings, but also points to the great importance he attaches to the poetics of space. He insists that a place has no meaning unless furnished with an emotional ingredient —hence his insistence on collective memory as an incontrovertible national symbol. This attitude recalls Michel de Certeau’s proposition that a place “implies an indication of stability”; space, however, “occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it” (117). In this way, space becomes “a practiced place” (117) which depends on an idiocratic perception.

On his visit to his birth-house in Washington Square, for instance, James finds that the building and the adjacent university edifices are leveled to the ground. Such annihilation of his personal past makes him feel “amputated of half [his] history” (71). Because of the confusion in his sense of the “National Symbolic,” he instantly feels stricken with a sense of corporeal helplessness. This feeling chiefly emanates from a loss of control over spatial and temporal markers of self- identity. Here, James figures himself as a colonized subject, recalling Frantz Fanon’s imagery of dismemberment in the colonial context. The native, bereft of his sense of belonging and turned mute by estrangement, becomes, to use Fanon’s words, “an amputation” or an imperfect subject in desperate quest for a national refuge (109-113).³

This is why James envies the Switzer and the Scot for the “luxury” of their “close and sweet and whole national consciousness” (67, emphasis James’s), which enhances the idea of intransience in their realm of national feelings. Since to him “One’s supreme relation is one’s relation to one’s country” and since nation is “a conception made up so largely of one’s countrymen and one’s countrywomen” (67), it is only the ideal state of national totality that can work as an antidote to the amputation he expressed. Identification with one’s countrymen and countrywomen (and later on with national symbols) is the only means by which reconstitution as a collective subject is made possible. National identity is a haven of totality which procures wholeness and belonging. It is right that as Lauren Gail Berlant proposes, “The nation enacts this promise by positing collective identification as the way in which

atomized sites become sutured by a synchronous participation in the perpetuation of a political and cultural collective life” (24).

In many ways, the National Symbolic is a *précis* of a compound set of concepts, standards, and value systems. Berlant speaks of “the fantasy-work of national identity” and defines the National Symbolic as more than just the “juridical,” “territorial,” “genetic,” “linguistic,” or “experiential” denominators, but also as “some tangled cluster of these” (4). The National Symbolic yokes together “affect to political life through the production of national ‘fantasy.’” It stands out as

[T]he order of discursive practices whose reign within a national space produces, and also refers to, the ‘law’ in which the accident of birth within a geographic/political boundary transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively-held history. Its traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals, and its narratives provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity; through the National Symbolic the historical nation aspires to achieve the inevitability of the status of natural law, a birthright (20).

For James, the National Symbolic proves usable in the sense that it helps him render America more intelligible as an objective configuration. In his effort to bestow significance and palpability to the American nation, and, arguably, to fuse nation to state,⁴ he seeks to attach meaning to the national symbols encountered on his journey across the different places he visits.

James’s view of nation applies to Anthony Smith’s argument about the “ethnosymbolist” perception of nation as “socio-cultural and symbolic, rather than demographic or political” (3). This is essentially because James stresses common memories, values, and traditions rather than other palpable factors. Yet, the wild changes that blighted his forsaken country impede continuity and permanence in his sense of nation. He complains that in America, it is no longer possible to keep the idea of nation “simple and strong and continuous.” To him such an idea ought to be cherished as incontrovertible, conclusive, and unassailable. He warns that too many alterations of it will ultimately make it wane: “To touch it overmuch, to pull it about, is to put it in peril of weakening” (67).

In his desperate attempts to recover the sense of the past, James tries to disengage the meaning of national belonging in national symbols to compensate for the meaning loss generated by estrangement and long exposure to Old-World culture and its barometers of artistic and cultural judgment. Having exhausted all his curiosity in the European “oracle,” he returns to America to seek “romance and mystery.” The ecstasy of the European experience is now “enfeebled” and “the European complexity” had become “the stuff ... of the real world.” What remains for him as the “palpitating pilgrim” is to record the vibrations of the continuously swelling “American civilization” (270). The culmination of his perception of change in America is voiced in his syllogism that “Europe had been romantic years before, because she was different from America; wherefore America would now be romantic because she was different from Europe” (270).

Having drained all his eagerness for Old-World romance, he now desperately looks for this sensation in his native land. He admits his traveller’s nostalgic and calculated thirst for “sharp impressions.” Therefore, he seeks romance in the Old South where he expects a “provision of vivid images, mainly beautiful and sad” (270), taking it for granted to be “romantically affected” (269). James explains that “When things were grandly sad, accordingly—sad on the great scale and with a certain nobleness of ruin—an element of

beauty seemed always secured.” This effort to impart meaning from “a compromised South,” renders James “a fond investor” who makes every effort to make it “pay” (274).

In the South, he is “tenderly... scratching for romance...in the deposit of history” (289). It is no wonder, then, that he starts his Richmond chapter with the expression of the strong romantic appeal of “going south” and thereby recalling the same older sensation of European travel. The South, being charged with memories of the Civil War and with the blood and flames of the battlefields, presents itself as the ideal site for novelty and romance. Arriving in Richmond, however, he realizes that he had “staked” too high on his “theory of the latent poetry of the South” (271), because his index of the past is dominated “with the impression of History all yet to be made” (340).

Richmond appears to him “blank and void,” and bereft of its Southern character (273). But James perseveres in making some profitable sense of his American experience and would not let vacuity take over his impressions. In the absence of references, he urgently wants the South in particular “to be beautiful” (274) and so, strains his mind to restore its historic majesty. He becomes a romantic traveller, seeking the essence of a lost romance and looking for the sensation of novelty in his “native ...forsaken scene” (270). His double guise as “repatriated absentee” and as traveller imposes on him a certain intellectual economy which allows him to be romantic about his motherland and also to anticipate stimulation similar to the one ignited in the past by the Old World.

Given the meaning loss that James feels in America, he attempts to reify the national symbols. He insists on their sanctity because they represent the promise of totality—the promise of the nation unsullied by foreign or alien presences, translating its primeval, unassailable nature as well as its impervious spaces. Telling from the space and attention he devotes to national symbols throughout *The American Scene* (the Capitol, the White House, General Grant’s Tomb, the statue of Lincoln, the American Flag, and I would argue, even *The American South*), it is possible to argue that James’s project is to fashion the sense of nation for America by giving visibility to the abstractions of American nationalism. As a subject long-accustomed to European influences, he encounters these symbols and rewrites their significance. His perusal of such symbols with a critical, yet fond eye, suggests his insistence on imparting a homogeneous national sense out of the “continuity of motion” that characterizes America.

James resents America’s “trivialization of history” and “inaccessibility to legend” (282); he is especially outraged by the characteristically American abatement of historical greatness and by the demystification of national symbols. The monument erected by the Hudson riverside to the memory of the sailors and soldiers of the Civil War and, with it, the tomb of General Grant, stand between “consecration and profanation” (109). The tomb of General Grant is “the property of the people” and is “as open as an hotel or a railway-station to any coming and going.” The monument stands “without mystery or ceremony to protect it,” contrary to the tomb of Napoleon at the Invalides, which, while being “a great national property,” still retains its distance as “the holy of holies, a great temple jealously guarded and formally approached” (110). He laments the absolute break with old sanctified forms which alone can ensure the preservation of the tabernacle. Yet, despite his negative feelings, he still sees that its exposure to the public and its “want of reserve,” does not make it “fail[] of its expression” (110). Even if the tomb is not “one of the most effective of commemorations it is one of the most missed.” He exaltedly concludes that “On the whole I distinctly ‘liked’ it” (111). It is interesting to see James, otherwise habitually controlled by aversion to all things

American, persist in imparting constructive meanings in hope to attain national inclusion. The same feeling is aroused by the Washington Capitol which strikes him as

The ark of the American covenant ... a compendium of all the national ideals, a museum, crammed full, even to overflowing, of all the national terms and standards, weights and measures and emblems of greatness and glory, and indeed as a builded record of half the collective vibrations of a people; their conscious spirit, their public faith, their bewildered taste, their ceaseless curiosity, their arduous and interrupted education” “The Washington dome is indeed capable” of yielding the “divine campagna-sense—of St. Peter’s and the like-coloured Tiber (265).

James insists that the reception of this edifice largely “depends” on “the visitor, who will be the more responsive...the further back into the ‘origins’ of the whole American spectacle his personal vision shall carry him” (264). The Capitol in Washington is a “vast and many-voiced creation” and the “hugest...of all the homes of debate” (264), which accounts for his irresistible attraction to it. He confesses that “I had found myself from the first adoring the Capitol, though I may not pretend here to dot all the i’s of all my reasons” (264). Indeed, he feels addressed, interpellated, and even incorporated by both these national symbols. James’s framing of national signs is not politically, but emotionally invested. In many ways, he celebrates his American self by acknowledging these symbols, reaffirming his collective identity, and suspending his individuality in the collective whole. He manages to comprehend his feelings towards the American nation when confronted with concrete objects through what Émile Durkheim calls a “spontaneous attachment” (221). This spontaneous response to the national symbols is again reminiscent of Berlant’s understanding of the National Symbolic and “the fantasy-work of national identity” (4) as “There is no logic to a national form but, rather, many simultaneously ‘literal’ and ‘metaphorical’ meanings, stated and unstated” (4).⁵ The uniqueness of *The American Scene*, therefore, is that it is not only a piercing indictment of American ways, but also a mature effort on James’s part to reunite with the land he had abandoned on the basis of youthful presumptions. The uniqueness of this book also lies in its being a poignant narrative of a strained homecoming that registers the transformative power of the National Symbolic on James’s perception of the American scene.

Despite all his uncertainties as to things American and his mistrust of change, James would never dismiss his American identity, nor would he opt for complete physical rupture. His quite belated “civic” relinquishment of American nationality which came one year before his death is an indication of his qualms regarding his national belonging. His outlook is characterized by nostalgic contrition with regard to his “apostasy”—a feeling that he confirms when he refers to himself as a “repentant absentee” in the first few pages of *The American Scene* (6). His return voyage to America is, on the one hand, a last attempt to bind together the enduring strings of attachment and tendrils of association of a wayward son towards his motherland, and, on the other hand, a final exertion on America itself to prove worthy of her son’s remorseful return.

Endnotes

1. Said argues that “imaginative geography” empowers the mind to strengthen “its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (**Orientalism** 54).
2. Berlant interestingly explains that “disruptions in the realm of the National Symbolic create a collective sensation of almost physical vulnerability: the subject without a nation experiences her/his own mortality and vulnerability because s/he has lost control over physical space and the historical time that marks that space as a part of her/his inheritance.” As for “The National Symbolic,” Berlant specifies that it “seeks to produce a fantasy of national integration, although the content of this fantasy is a matter of cultural debate and historical transformation” (21).
3. See Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968 [1961]), 209.
4. Michael Geisler, for instance argues that “National symbols perform an important function not only as catalysts for the formation and maintenance of national identity. They take on a particularly crucial importance in fusing a nation to a state” (xiv).
5. What Berlant means by ‘fantasy’ is to “designate how national culture becomes local—through the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness.” To Berlant, “There is no logic to a national form but, rather, many simultaneously ‘literal’ and ‘metaphorical’ meanings, stated and unstated” (4).