HENRY JAMES: A SENTIMENTAL TOURIST
AND RESTLESS ANALYST

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Henry James wrote accounts of travel over nearly forty years. In the rage of anthologizing which has rescued from magazines even his earliest uncollected accounts, critical attention has dwelt heavily on James’s report of what he saw. The more interesting subject, however, is James himself, for the travel literature powerfully confirms James’s realization that he was exclusively, for whatever vivid or deficient reactions the fact might involve, a man of imagination. Thus the travel accounts add striking brush-strokes to the self-portrait which he sketched in his notebooks, letters, and criticism, as well as in more forthright self-revelations.

In the autobiography written in his last years, he recalled himself as a small boy always dawdling and gaping, and saw in that memory the very pattern of his always wanting “just to be somewhere . . . and somehow receive an impression.” He remembered feeling that to stop looking would be to take a long step towards not living at all. When in his twenties he began writing travel sketches, he made picturesque contrasts, impressions, and sketchable details one of his constant subjects. His other chief subject is the reaction of his powerful imagination, which at first outran actual experience and later suffered correction.

For at first he yielded to a tendency to “make images in advance.” As a youthful “sentimental tourist” he gave Saratoga in anticipation “a shape and figure . . . a certain complexion, a certain colour.” When he found the place different from the construction of his imagination, he acknowledged that his unsophisticated visions gained by their transmutation into fact. “There is an essential indignity in indefiniteness,” he acknowledged; “you cannot allow for accidents and details until you have seen them. They give more to the imagination than they receive from it.”1 The Saratoga of reality proved more satisfactory than the “all-too-primitive Elysium” he had constructed in advance. But three years later, in the Roman church of Santa Maria Maggiore, he reflected that his

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"perfect feast of fancy" was largely the product of his "capricious intellect." Over the years, James found that in the realm of travel experience "the virtue of the business" rested more in what he brought by imagination than in what he took by observation.

The travel accounts express James's reaction to acts of possession. He had seen Europe in childhood and received part of his education there, but when he returned in 1869 he went to seize it. He wrote of his experience then and later, but even after forty-five years, in his final recollection of the experience, he expressed nothing so keenly as his avidity for impressions and the complexity of his imaginative response.

England and Italy held the greatest charm for him, and after them, France; the Low Countries, Switzerland, and Germany had lesser appeals. He never saw more of Spain than San Sebastian, and never attained his wish to visit Greece. He longed vaguely for the East, but he had scant interest in remote parts of the world. He wrote most interestingly of his own country after twenty years of absence had given him an eagerness to penetrate mysteries much like the receptiveness with which he had approached Europe in his youth.

The collected travel accounts are more or less connected series of essays arranged to give the impression of continuous tours. James generally attempts to compose his details into a pleasing pictorial account of the places he visited. He evolved a casual, easy, and graceful style for his travel pieces, and cultivated a cosmopolitan urbanity of tone. This is the manner of the "sentimental tourist." The "restless analyst" who much later wrote The American Scene speaks with a different voice.

James seldom muses on scenery. Even as a small boy he was "positively conscious" that the social scene would say more to him than anything else, and it was the human note he wanted, even among impressions of nature. In Switzerland he found that there was "a limit to the satisfaction with which you can sit staring at a mountain," and he preferred "the more equal intercourse between man and man." In the placid English countryside he found his chief delight in the human associations of a scene in which "every-
thing... has a history, has played a part, has a value to the imagination.²⁵

His human associations with natural scenes were frequently drawn from history and literature. At Poitiers, for example, he could look out from the Promenade de Blossac, through uncertain whether he was regarding the actual battlefield, and lose himself in reflections and associations. In Warwickshire, he peopled the landscape with characters from Trollope, and regarded his doing so as an example of the way Americans must bring imagination into play in the presence of English life.⁷ He complained that the American scene was deficient in the poetry of association, whether from history or literature,⁷ and by contrast cited the way in which the Roman scene provided an unbroken continuity of impressions at once "historic, literary, and suggestive.⁸

What James termed his "historic imagination" is actually a sentimental attachment to a sense of the past. He was almost entirely deficient in the sense of history, so far as that involved understanding of the motives and values of other times. He cared little for accuracy; his having a subjective impression was quite enough. His reflections on the battlefield of Poitiers sufficiently indicate the type of reaction he repeatedly experienced.

It is carrying the feeling of race to quite inscrutable lengths when a vague American permits himself an emotion because more than five centuries ago, on French soil, one rapacious Frenchman got the better of another. Edward was a Frenchman as well as John, and French were the cries that urged each of the hosts to the fight. French is the beautiful motto graven round the image of the Black Prince as he lies ever at rest in the choir of Canterbury: a la morte ne pensai-je mye. Nevertheless, the victory of Poitiers declines to lose itself in these considerations; the sense of it is part of our heritage, the joy of it a part of our imagination, and it filters down through the centuries and migrations till it titillates a New Yorker who forgets in his elation that he happens at that moment to be enjoying the hospitality of France. It was something done, I know not how justly, for England; and what was done in the fourteenth century for England was done also for New York.⁹

In like fashion, the Citadel at Quebec evoked for James an image of the English past, as the Chateau d'Amboise recalled the French wars of religion.

In the same way that literary reference added interest to natural scenery, it created at times the very appeal of a church or a city. In the Cathedral at Tours, James found that the "profane name of Blossac" added an interest to the venerable sanctuary, and he wrote

²⁵ Portraits of Places, p. 271.
²⁶ Ibid., p. 256.
⁸ Transatlantic Sketches, p. 153.
⁹ A Little Tour in France, p. 164 f.
rather more of Balzac’s novel, *The Cure of Tours*, than he did of the church. In the end he went in search of the house of one of Balzac’s characters. At Angoulême he found the chief interest of the town in the fact that Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* had “placed” the characters of the fiction there for him. He even congratulated himself that those personages were more real than mere historic individuals, and successfully avoided the “vagueness of identity” that was the misfortune of historical characters.

As for the suggestive—so far as it may be distinguished from what James regarded as the literary or the historic—it was an essence he frequently detected. He felt that “a general impression of the past” was the chief thing Siena had to offer a casual observer. In summing up his reactions to the Boboli Gardens of Florence, with the view of the Pitti Palace which recalled to him the generations of the Medici who had lived there, he defined at once what the past furnished him in Europe and what he missed in America. “What remains ... now is a mere tone in the air, a vague expression in things, a hint to the questioning fancy. Call it much or little, this is the interest of old places.” It could even evoke the ghosts of the past. At Haddon Hall in the growing dusk James felt that if there had been a ghost on the premises he would have seen it, and decided afterwards that he had. “I did see it, as we see ghosts nowadays. I felt the incommunicable spirit of the scene with an almost painful intensity. The old life, the old manners, the old figures seemed present again.”

There were times when he felt a strong reaction in favor of the actual, but this mood was infrequent, and James habitually valued places and scenes in proportion as they carried a weight of association or suggestion, a value for the imagination. Calculated ceremony had little charm for him; he absented himself from London during the celebration of Victoria’s jubilee. He preferred the leisurely, individual impression, and he gave advice on the best hours for avoiding crowds.

It is typical of James that his reactions to places should frequently depend on childhood impressions. Nothing in all the travel writing is more charming than his account of an excursion to Greenwich:

It is doubtless owing to the habit of obtrusive and unprofitable reverie that the sentimental tourist thinks it very fine to see the Greenwich observatory lifting its two modest little brick towers. The sight of this useful edifice gave me an amount of pleasure which may at first seem un-
reasonable. The reason was, simply, that I used to see it as a child, in woodcuts, in school-geographies, in the corners of large maps which had a glazed, sallow surface, and which were suspended in unexpected places, in dark halls and behind doors. The maps were hung so high that my eyes could reach only to the lower corners, and these corners usually contained a print of a strange looking house, standing among trees upon a grassy bank that swept down before it with the most engaging steepness. I used always to think that it must be an immense pleasure to hurl one's self down this curving precipice. Close at hand was usually something printed about something being at such and such a number of degrees 'east of Greenwich.' Why east of Greenwich? The vague wonder that the childish mind felt on this point gave the place a mysterious importance, and seemed to put it into relation with the difficult and fascinating parts of geography—the countries of unintentional outline and the lonely-looking pages of the atlas. Yet there it stood the other day, the precise point from which the great globe is measured; there was the plain little facade with the old-fashioned cupolas; there was the bank on which it would be so delightful not to be able to stop running. It made me feel terribly old to find that I was not even tempted to begin.\footnote{Portraits of Places, p. 221 f.}

To such experience as this more is brought than is ever taken; it is in fact memories and associations that make the experience itself.

The most sentimental tourist, however, cannot forever continue at the active pitch. In one ancient city on a hill-top, James found that his imagination refused to project into the dark old town "that sympathetic glow which forms half the substance of . . . genial impressions."\footnote{Transatlantic Sketches, p. 290.} He recognized, too, the fact that observation of foreign lands is at best extremely superficial. At times he questioned the value of travel at all, if it meant leaving home only to see new forms of human suffering. There were moods of reaction against "beautiful useless things," though James reflected that the healthier state of mind was to allow time for intelligence to "make . . . its connections."\footnote{Ibid., p. 287.}

At the end of his first visit to Rome in the early 1870's he departed with the "insistent faith" that his gathered impressions would "emerge into vivid relief if life or art should demand them." His art demanded a good many of them, and they emerged with sufficient vividness when he had had time to "make connections"; but he never mistook them for insights into the real life of Italy. England was another matter; it was never "foreign" to him, like Italy and France. After he settled in England he discarded the manners of the tourist and the relaxed enjoyment of impressions, for in England he was accepted into society, and he took his effort of understanding seriously. And within England, London provided a "banquet of initiation" which prolonged itself for years, until
James felt that it had fed his intelligence more than any other source.\textsuperscript{17}

In all James’s accounts of travel before the turn of the century his imaginative experience forms the substance of the essays. He does not report, guide-book fashion, what is to be seen, but presents the experience of his own visit, with all its personal, imaginative accompaniments. This is the method of the sentimental tourist, as he frequently styled himself. But his interest in travel accounts declined as the freshness of impression which prompted them gave way to accumulated impressions that nourished his fiction.

When James returned to America in 1904 after an absence of twenty years and reported his journey in The American Scene (1907), he considered himself now a “restless analyst,” capable of criticism as he had not been in Europe. There is some irony to this delusion, for The American Scene differs from the earlier travel essays chiefly in the even greater quantity of what James “brings” and the richer and fuller notation of what he “takes.” Like all the travel accounts, it is primarily a record of imaginative experience, now raised to a pitch which James exceeds only in his autobiography. But by an enrichment of irony, James actually does succeed in penetrating further into the American scene than the European by the very intensity of his entire reliance on impressions.

For one thing, expatriation had now made it possible for his imagination to respond to America as it could no more react to Europe. European complexity had become for him usual and calculable, while “with his relaxed curiosity reviving and his limp imagination once more on the stretch” James could now find “romance and mystery—in other words the amusement of interest,” in America.\textsuperscript{18} He had always valued the intensity of first impressions; he found now that they were accompanied by trains of association that receded to the dimness of his extreme youth. This struck him as a great advantage; besides the freshness of the inquiring stranger he had also, he felt, the acuteness of the initiated native; he was convinced he would vibrate with more curiosity than the most earnest of foreign visitors.

He was fully aware that he was incapable of providing information on “immensities of size and space, of trade and traffic, of organization, political, educational, economic.” He would have nothing to do with statistics; his record would speak only of his personal adventure. “I would take my stand,” he declared, “on my gathered impressions, since it was all for them, and for them only, that I returned; I would in fact go to the stake for them.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} The Middle Years (New York, 1917), p. 60.
\textsuperscript{18} The American Scene (New York, 1907), p. 351.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. v.
perceptions, enriched by James's lifelong concern for the human subject and his "rage for connections," make up the substance of *The American Scene*. When repeatedly James discovered that his vivid impressions had emerged out of elements insufficient to account for them, he positively congratulated himself that he was not a journalist dependent on items.

Again and again he found his subject so thin as to require more of the imagination than it offered it. When he felt that the history he encountered was neither very stout nor the rarities of nature very rare, he confessed his need to be "shamelessly subjective" about both. This involved him in a problem of notation, for he found that a little of all his impressions was reflected in each of them. To detach or reject one was to mutilate or falsify the others, for the history of a given impression often resided in those which led up to it or accompanied it. This explains the density of James's notation, which for years was held to make *The American Scene* a curiosity of literature.

The American scene was for him primarily the American social scene. The "great lonely land" actually depressed him with its vastness. Nature in America seemed to him unfinished, as society was as yet unformed. During a twilight journey on Lake Worth, where palms silhouetted in the sunset made him think of the Nile, it seemed to him that the American lake was the greater antiquity—it was "previous" to everything.29

Even at best the historic impress on America appeared to James slight, and he repeatedly felt the necessity of "reading into" his American subjects before they could give out interest. He even created interest out of the blankness itself, as when he visited Richmond. That he felt justified in his method is evident from his definition of history, made at a moment when the triviality of his subject, though he made it the source of rich subjective experience, tempted him almost to apologize. He restrained the impulse, and drew courage from his reflection that "History is never, in any rich sense, the immediate crudity of what 'happens,' but the much finer complexity of what we read into it and think of in connection with it."21

This is precisely the "shameless subjectivism" of James's responses turned to aspects of the past, though prompted by the individual report of the immediate experience. Its interest lies in the observer, who must indeed be ready to go to the stake for his impressions, for he has almost nothing else. James felt, for ex-

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ample, that any report of Independence Hall which he might make could be "news" only so far as it was news of himself; in that character it could pretend to freshness, even brilliance. He found that "every fact was convertible into a fancy," and that trivial events could again and again renew his appreciation of "the mystery and marvel of experience" by which small externals prompted an enormous inner enrichment. He felt nothing was more wonderful than the quantity of significant character a well-guided imagination could recognize in the scantest group of features, objects, or persons. 22 There were subjects, however, to which it failed utterly to respond; mere promiscuous encounter never alone evoked interest for James where he felt none or where, as with Wall Street, he was simply baffled.

James's account of America has the weakness of its omissions, but also the coherence of its consistent subjectivism. This was all, James felt, that it could very well have, for even to the most restless of analysts conclusions were impossible. The "great inscrutable answer to questions" hung in the vast American sky, to his imagination, as "something fantastic and abracadabra!" which would become legible only with time. 23 Meanwhile he noted the absence of social forms, the terrible impermanence of things in the face of money-making possibilities, the rampant commercialism, and the childishness of a society confident of its safety in an absence alike of doubts or convictions.

Though he spoke for himself in declaring that the unsatisfied wants of the spirit must be met somehow, and revealed himself, in his shameless subjectivism, busily knocking together substitutes, he discovered at last that the country at large was also knocking together, somehow, substitutes for an appetite very like his own.

... the human imagination absolutely declines everywhere to go to sleep without some apology at least for a supper. The collective consciousness, in however empty an air, gasps for a relation, as intimate as possible, to something superior, something as central as possible, from which it may more or less have proceeded and round which its life may revolve—and its dim desire is always, I think, to do it justice, that this object or presence shall have had as much as possible of an heroic or romantic association. But the difficulty is that in these later times... the heroic or romantic elements... have been all too tragically obscure... so that the central something... has had to be extemporized rather pitifully after the fact, and made to consist of the biggest hotel or the biggest common school, the biggest factory, the biggest newspaper office, or, for climax of desperation, the house of the biggest billionaire. These are the values resorted to in default of higher, for with some colored rag or other the general imagination, snatching its chance, must dress its doll. 24

22 Ibid., pp. 277, 65, 380.
23 Ibid., p. 118.
24 Ibid., p. 279.
Dressing its doll seemed to James also an explanation for the great American artistic activity of "faking." The prevalence of it confirmed his view of the childish explanation of American society, for the public which could respond to the arts of fakery seemed to him "quite incalculably young."  

_The American Scene_ is James's most coherent attempt to give an account of a society. In becoming the restless analyst, the whilom sentimental tourist approached his subject with a mature perceptiveness more penetrating than his youthful enthusiasm. But really, he did nothing but what he had always done. He lived by his imagination and cultivated impressions. Sentimental or analytical, James the tourist was consistent; his sentiments and his analysis alike depended upon the responses of a powerful imagination which ever, in its experiences, brought more than it took. The travel essays thus complement James's account of himself as a man of imagination. They are even proof that he could be nothing else.

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