PART ONE

A Dream City, Lyric Years, and a Great War

1. The Novel as Ironic Reflection

Novelists as different as Henry James and Theodore Dreiser began the twentieth century as they ended the nineteenth, torn by conflicting allegiances. On one side, their openness to what Henry James called the “strange irregular rhythm of life,” and thought of as the “strenuous force” that kept fiction on its feet, drew them toward history and a shared story of conquest, the taming of a continent and the making of a new nation and a new people, as we see in a range of titles, including James’s The American (1877), William Dean Howells’s A Modern Instance (1882), Gertrude Stein’s The Making of Americans (1925), Willa Cather’s O Pioneers! (1913), Dreiser’s An American Tragedy (1925), and John Dos Passos’s U.S.A. (1938). On another, they were drawn toward what James called the “romantic” and described as the “beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire,” things “we never can directly know.” Like Flaubert, James wanted to tidy up the loose, baggy traditions of the novel. Even more than Flaubert, he associated looseness with history. Simply by placing human thought and desire under the aspect of the “beautiful,” defined in terms of order and subtle indirection (“circuit and subterfuge”), James evoked the lyrical tradition of the nineteenth century, in which self-examination became a prelude to self-transcendence and the journey toward the self’s interior became a covert preparation for a journey up and out of time itself, for the solitary reader as well as the solitary singer. The move toward the interior provided the means, but self-transcendence was the end of the lyric, the real work of which was to bring the solitary self’s thought and desire into harmony with the timeless world of “great” poems and “noble” thoughts, the scattered notes of the “supreme” or “absolute” song, that had begun when human time began – or more drastically, into harmony with the timeless music of the spheres. All art “constantly aspires toward the condition of music,” Walter Pater announced in Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873). “The thinker feels himself floating above the earth in an astral dome,” Friedrich Nietzsche added in Human, All-Too-Human (1878), in discussing Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, “with the dream of immortality in his heart: All the stars seem to glimmer about him and the earth seems to sink ever further downward.” In the hands of the Poet, Stéphane Mallarmé added, in “Crisis in Poetry” (1886–95), unlike those “of the mob,” language “is turned, above all, to dream and song.”
None of these writers – Pater, Nietzsche, Mallarmé – advocated traditional forms of spirituality. But it was not foolish error that led “upholders of culture,” including religious leaders, who often turned cold eyes on the novel, to prefer lyric poetry, particularly as represented by the “Genteel” tradition and the “Fireside” poets, nor an accident that they did so the more ardently as the nineteenth century’s assault on traditional religious beliefs intensified. However secular or even pagan the lyric’s enterprise might seem at times, it remained tilted toward the spiritual.

The novel, by contrast, remained the most terrestrial of literary forms. Even when it was drawn toward the voice of a single, solitary character caught in the act of flight – Huckleberry Finn’s, for example – its own less sublime commitments to ordinary and even sordid aspects of human thought and desire and obdurate social realities held it. The novel’s orientation flowed from its commitment to what James called the real: the world of actualities – the colloquial, the vernacular, and the regional; the daily rhythms of love and work and play; the pull of desire and the push of competition in the day-to-day tasks of getting and spending money as well as time – things, James added, that we can’t not know sooner or later in one way or another and yet can never fully measure. If, furthermore, the first of these moves, toward sordid or seamy consciousnesses, opened the novel to a fuller but less pretty psychology, the second maintained its commitment to the force of history – and that, as Robert Frost might have said, has made all the difference.

The novel might be epic in reach, but it had less interest than the epic in valorizing the past. Whatever role it might play in valorizing social authority, it could not, in Genteel terms, be lyric. Many of the ministers and priests who praised the lyric’s devotion to spirituality and transcendence warned against the novel, fearing that its allegiance to the historical, material world it purported to represent was likely to promote worldliness. Novelists might lament, as James did, the inadequate life and materialist values of the Gilded Age. Certainly they wrote more out of disenchantment than approbation. But they gave their deeper loyalty to what Walt Whitman – a reform-minded poet bent on claiming poetry for the same middle class that had claimed and been claimed by the novel – called, in A Backward Glance o’er Travel’d Roads (1888), “vivification” of contemporary facts and “common lives” and defined as “the true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times.” The rising authority of the novel – which by the late nineteenth century posed so direct a challenge that William Dean Howells wondered aloud whether the lyric might not be dying – was thus grounded in its willingness to embrace an expanding “people,” the middle class, and grapple with the force of history, even when such commitments meant confronting an incorporating, rampaging, ransacking business civilization, thundering “past with the rush of the express,” as Andrew Carnegie put it in Triumphant America (1886) – and even when this willingness carried the risk of implicating it in the historical processes and materialist values of the class and culture it embraced.

As concept, history embraces both the natural world as primal and residual
force, and the social, cultural world as constituted of all the things that humans have done to nature, including the transformations they have worked on themselves in the process of doing that work. But it also embraces art – if by art we mean, as Henry James did, the “maximum of ironic reflections” that humans can bring to bear on the scenes and spectacles of life. At the turn of the century, a wide array of interactive events and developments – periods of prosperity and depression; new technologies; waves of immigration; rapid urbanization; a new, centralized form of corporate capitalism; a Great War; big labor; bigger and bigger government; the rise of the professions; the cult of the therapeutic; the cult of personal pleasure; rapid communications and rapid transit; rapid transformations in the lives of black Americans as they struggled up from bondage; and the emergence of the “new woman” as writer and protagonist, as well as object of poorly repressed anxieties – changed society. But they also changed fiction by deepening the alienation and the fascination writers experienced as they confronted the nation’s changing scene. Artists in general and novelists in particular became more self-conscious, self-absorbed, and self-referential between 1890 and 1940 in part because the pace of change seemed almost out of control and in part because, during what André Malraux called “the twilight of the absolute,” the arts – and later the disciplines devoted to their study – were becoming their own absolutes. Writers and artists began thinking of their works as autotelic because their age was so convincingly dominated by other forces.

Revisiting the United States in 1904, for the first time in twenty-five years, Henry James encountered a greater array of items than he had ever before seen – greater, he added in The American Scene (1907), than his “own pair of scales would ever weigh.” The problem James faced – of whether the maximum of ironic reflection could match the “maximum of ‘business’ spectacle” then looming in the United States in a mass too large for any known language – lingered at least through the first several decades of the twentieth century as the problem of the novel. If Nietzsche also has lingered, especially for literary artists, along with Darwin, Marx, and Freud, as a major precursor, it is because the question of art has lingered, stubborn and obdurate, as a question not merely about the cultural role of art but, more ominously, about the adequacy of art to any cultural role it might care to claim.

One problem had to do with discontinuities or, more accurately, with their loss, which became a great theme of James, as well as Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. For what loss of a sense of sequence threatened was narrative. In traditional village cultures, Ezra Pound observed, people acquired a sense of slow time and thus of sequence based on shared knowledge. Because they knew what they, their families, and neighbors had done before, during, and after “the Revolution,” and then regularly related what they knew in stories, their lives acquired historical meaning as parts of a cultural narrative. As a result, their lives lent themselves to formal fictional narrative. Cities, by contrast, like modern capitalist economies, celebrated the
new and the present. They bombarded consciousness with sensory impressions of changing objects and scenes that overlapped; they were, Pound said, “cinematographic.” As a result, they threatened to defy narrative altogether. Yet it was not only the possibility of narrative that was at stake; it was also the adequacy of language. The spectacle of life seemed, as James put it in The American Scene, to be hanging there, suspended “in the vast American sky . . . fantastic and abracadabrant, belonging to no known language.”

Hoping to resist what he once called (in a letter to Daniel Cory) “the alienation of the intellect from the milieu,” George Santayana used the role of the outsider-as-insider to gain insight into the persons and places of the land that from 1872 to 1912 he more or less called home. There were, to be sure, important things that Santayana only glimpsed, including the special role of economic abundance in shaping this country’s version of modernity and the peculiar way in which, having created and named itself as a nation and a people, and having built into its federal organization and its Constitution a set of provisions against both fragmentation and unionization, the United States had promptly set about testing, both in the Civil War and in unprecedented waves of immigration, whether it could resist the centrifugal forces working to fragment it without succumbing to the centripetal forces working to homogenize it. Still, what he saw, he saw clearly: that, given its tilt toward the future, unimpeded, as he put it, “by survivals of the past,” the United States would embrace the modern, would become a modern instance, a window to the world’s future. Offended by such hasty embrace, Santayana returned to Europe, where old traditions and institutions were slowing the march of time. But he stayed in the United States long enough to see, as though for the first time, how marked it was by its openness to change.

What Santayana both exemplified and grasped as insight was the peculiar authority, moral as well as aesthetic, that a sense of marginality would confer on writers shrewd enough or lucky enough to control it, particularly in a country where changing facts were coming increasingly to loom as too numerous and novel for any one mouth or any known language. In 1903, a year before James’s last trip to the United States and nine before Santayana’s departure, W. E. B. Du Bois published The Souls of Black Folk (1903), announcing that there was “dogged strength” as well as pain in the predicament of a people who, robbed of “true self-consciousness,” were permitted to see themselves, in anger, pity, fear, or amused contempt, only “through the eyes of others,” and so were doomed to feel “their twoness.” Du Bois thus joined Santayana in recognizing, first, the extraordinary pressures that the United States would exert on the people it marginalized and dispossessed and, second, the peculiar authority that the voices of such people would come to possess as the twentieth century unfolded. In considerable measure, the nation’s fiction recounts the plights and adventures of deprived, betrayed, or battered people, often still young, like Huckleberry Finn, who are forced to enter the social fray when the twin tasks of redefining reality and shaping a new language adequate to ironic reflection in a new age are becoming the tasks of life as well as art.
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Seizing this task as art’s challenge was Mark Twain’s great achievement; living out its consequences was Huckleberry Finn’s mixed fate. When Twain thought of writing a sequel to his masterpiece and saw Huckleberry Finn in middle age, standing on the edge of the twentieth century rather than on the edge of a boundless territory, he thought of him as having gone mad and fallen silent.

2. CONFIDENCE AND UNCERTAINTY IN THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

The fiction of Henry James features “passionate pilgrims” who leave home in search of “chance feasts” and then proceed through life as “wondering and dawdling and gaping” seekers. But it also features people who scheme and design, pushed by economic competition and pulled by sexual desire. The discourse of imaginative contemplation, the discourse of profit and loss, and the discourse of sexual conquest merge in James’s work, each converted, as it were, into the currency of the other. In The Golden Bowl (1904), Adam Verver’s “majestic scheme” possesses “all the sanctions of civilization” and aims at meeting the needs of the “thirsty millions” who seek culture as people once sought faith. Behind his “strange scheme” lie two convictions: that “he had force” because “he had money” and that “acquisition of one sort” could become the “perfect preliminary to acquisition of another.” Finally, we come to see both the majestic millions he has made and the majestic palace of art he envisages as products of his capitalistic gifts for “transcendent calculation and imaginative gambling,” for “getting in” and “getting out” at the right times – in short, for the “creation of ‘interests’ that were the extinction of other interests.”

In order to place Adam Verver’s talent for accumulating money and power under the aspect of his talent for majestic scheming in the name of art and, conversely, his talent for majestic scheming under the aspect of his acquisitive talents, James employs a language in which erotic, political, economic, and aesthetic desires intermingle. His cosmic strategists want to rid themselves of his passionate pilgrims, just as his passionate pilgrims want to free themselves of his cosmic strategists. In the end, however, each discovers a need for the other. If, furthermore, some of his characters, including Isabel Archer, long to be free of history, so also does history, if by history we mean human experience as shaped by political economies, want to be free of resistive, dissenting individuals in full possession of individual consciousnesses. Intolerant of many things in James’s novels, history is especially intolerant of genuine independence – this being one of James’s great themes, at least from The Portrait of a Lady (1881) on.

The Portrait underwent a long gestation, during which James struggled to transform his story of “the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl” into a big subject. One way was to surround his heroine with a rich social context of people and events; another was to make her an heir of Romanticism’s long effort to discover and name the private, incommunicable
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things we can never directly know, and so permit her to emerge as an independent figure of consciousness. In theory, James honored the second of these more than the first; in practice, he used both: he added characters and events that enlarge Isabel Archer’s world, and he endowed her with a personal consciousness that carries her toward a sense of destiny.

These two strategies for making a small subject large—the one by incorporating social history, the other by tracing the emergence of a personal consciousness capable of measuring history—were in fact becoming central to James’s notion both of himself as artist and of the novel as literary form, even as he wrote the Portrait. Like Watch and Ward and The Bostonians, the Portrait reflects the lingering influence of female novelists James read in his youth, especially Louisa May Alcott and Anne Moncure Crane Seemuller, and the lingering influence of his father’s confused opinions about sex, marriage, and women. But the Portrait enlarges the play of James’s conflicted imagination in two related ways, and so makes visible two strategies that have shaped the efforts of novelists to cope with a world of rapidly expanding and changing facts. James wanted to find some way of doing justice to the pressure of history as overdetermining force, while also exploring the fates of individuals who want to feel free. If abject failure was one possibility, unsuccess was another. Most of his passionate pilgrims begin, like Isabel Archer, as unsponsored children and then become isolated expatriates or marginalized observers of an alien world.

The Portrait begins with a description of a dense, palpable milieu that tends to incorporate everyone:

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do,—the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime."

James’s emphasis here is on an imposing social order that has served as an effective medium of value. We see one token of its force in its ability to envelop people who prefer not to partake of it; another, in terms like “dedicated,” “delightful,” “admirable,” and “innocent”; and yet another, in the self-assured voice of its narrator. As the Portrait unfolds, however, it leaves this world behind. First, we encounter Isabel Archer, a child of promise, who comes from the still new world of the United States. Since she is open and unaffected, and wants to experience life firsthand, Isabel is perfectly suited to serve as an exemplary protagonist of a cautionary tale in which the heroine suffers in order to become wise. Early in the novel, the narrator seems confident that society’s lessons will turn out to be good as well as inevitable—as they are, more or less, for Jane Austen’s Emma Woodhouse. Soon, however, we discover that the society underlying England’s tea parties suffers from some deep malaise: “There’s something the matter with us all,” Ralph Touchett says, reminding
us that, although the gardens and drawing rooms of England and Europe demand accommodation and sometimes reward it, they no longer serve as the locus of value. Only Mr. Touchett, a dying citizen of a dying age, discloses what conviction, connectedness, and loyalty might mean. Each of the other characters seems somehow already to have learned, without remembering when or how, the lesson that Ralph Touchett lifts to visibility with his gift to Isabel: that money is the foundation of their social order. Simply by accepting the imperial process by which Isabel, upon acquiring a large fortune, becomes the center of their lives, they acquiesce to the economic imperative on which their society is based — and thus commit themselves to confronting the large question of whether freedom is to be defined in spiritual or material terms, as freedom from earthly entanglements and restraints or as possession of money and power.

Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond differ from other characters in the Portrait primarily because they remain untroubled by what they know and so are prepared to make the most of it. Having noted that “the greatest invention of the nineteenth century was the invention of the method of invention,” Alfred North Whitehead went on to describe the rise of the inventor as a fall into “disillusionment” or “at least anxiety.” Having once thought of themselves “as a little lower than the angels,” human beings had become servants “of nature,” he said. Fulfilling the prophecy of Francis Bacon, he added, this turnabout had undermined “the foundations of the old civilisation.” Socialized almost beyond the point of being human, Merle and Osmond show little interest in nature. Their world is social, their style imperial. In their attitude toward society, however, they mirror the same curious dominance-as-subservience that Whitehead locates in modern science’s attitude toward nature. Moved by a desire similar to modern science’s, they follow a similar strategy. They are realists who submit to society in order to give the appearance of dominating it.

The confrontation between Isabel and Madame Merle, in Chapter 19 of the Portrait, turns for Isabel on the role of appearances — the trappings of class, such as manners and accents, as well as the furnishings of life, teacups, gowns, and jewels — in representing the real thing: her unique, essential self. But it turns for Madame Merle on whether there is a self that precedes or even exists independent of its signs and the social conventions that govern them — the hope of semiautonomy as well as transcendence having already been surrendered. This debate, though of uncertain beginnings, is intensely modern, and Merle and Osmond are modern in nothing so much as this: that in them the line between being passive and being active dissolves. As master manipulators, they stage and direct scenes; as servants if not slaves, attendant lords, in J. Alfred Prufrock’s phrase, they play out their lives as overdetermined creatures in a world they never made. “It still remains to be seen,” Whitehead concluded, “whether the same actor can play both” the part of the inventor and the part of the servant. Having once pictured himself as the detached lord of his own creations, James Joyce came full circle in Finnegans Wake: “My consumers, are
they not my producers?" Merle and Osmond know how to manipulate money and status, conversations and conventions, words, paintings, and people, including themselves, for their own amusement. They treat everyone the same: as pawns in a game played out in the twilight of purposive existence. Passion and pleasure as well as joy and wonder lie somehow already behind them. Amusement, precariously based on a sense of dominance, is their only anodyne for malaise.

By making Isabel’s world their world, James turns his cautionary tale of youthful folly into the tale of an evil fate. Born a child of promise, Isabel falls into history, only to find herself “ground in the very mill of the conventional.” In this story, which James almost certainly conceived as a version of the story of the United States and the modern world, “our heroine” suffers out of all proportion to her folly, largely because she is cleverer at doing what she wills – at having her way – than she is at willing what she wills – that is, at clarifying and naming her own desires. Isabel’s problems have several sources, of course. Her money brings possessions that become something like a soft if not an iron cage; and since she is a child of the United States, she assumes that money brings responsibility because it appears to bring power. In addition, she is surrounded by people who are expert manipulators of themselves and others.

But Isabel’s deeper problems revolve around her own uncertain impulses. Her “visions of a completed consciousness” – like Ralph Touchett’s dream of seeing her soar above her world – turn less on a narrative desire to enter her world and take hold of it than on a lyric desire to transcend it. Even after she falls into history, she finds surrendering her separatist desires very difficult. Furthermore, as she begins to accept the fact of being enmeshed, her own consciousness emerges as strange, uncertain, and conflicted until it comes to resemble the ambiguous world in which she moves. In exploring what it means that humans in a technological age can more nearly do what they will than ever before yet cannot will what they will, the great physicist Werner Heisenberg quotes the Chinese sage Chang Tsu: “Whoever loses his simplicity becomes uncertain in the impulses of his spirit.” And so it is with Isabel. Loss of simplicity not only changes her; it makes her story a tragedy of the socialization of consciousness – a development that seems to thrust itself on James’s narrator almost as harshly as on his reader, making the Portrait a new novel.

Just after Isabel recognizes that Osmond’s declaration of love is something she has invited as well as something that surprises her, James’s narrative voice changes. Once sure of itself, it now finds itself moving over strange and threatening ground:

What had happened was something that for a week past her imagination had been going forward to meet; but here, when it came, she stopped – that sublime principle somehow broke down. The working of this young lady’s spirit was strange, and I can only give it to you as I see it, not hoping to make it seem altogether natural. Her imagination, as I say, now hung back:
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there was a last vague space it couldn’t cross – a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet. ¹

With the narrator’s early assurance, and our own as readers, now relics of the past, like teatime at Gardencourt, what is left – for Isabel, her narrator, and her readers alike – is a world in which the representative structure is Osmond’s “house of darkness,” where life and art, ground in the mill of the conventional, seem moribund. Isabel’s triumph consists in recognizing, first, that her world is one in which all human values are threatened and, second, that in its own conflicts her consciousness resembles her world. For it is the shock of this double recognition that initiates a moment of “liminality” in which she realizes that her old dreams for herself in that world must be relinquished. In her midnight meditation – in Chapter 42 – Isabel’s internal life becomes the other side of a social scene that is slouching its way toward emptiness because it no longer understands its own desires. To salvage from that world and for it – and of herself and for it – all that can be salvaged, she must recognize that she is entangled and encumbered, that selfhood is a social issue as well as a private concern, and that to become a responsible social agent she must master words, customs, conventions, mores, and institutions that possess histories of their own that preclude their ever becoming wholly hers. Similarly, she must confront the “bitter” knowledge that she, too, has been used: “the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron.” This recognition becomes an extension of her rereading of her life, and it carries her away from the lyric desire for transcendence toward a narrative desire for entanglement, not as “renunciation,” but as a deep “sense that life would be her business for a long time to come.” Rome, she has come to realize, is a “world of ruins” where “people have suffered.” These interrelated recognitions possess, as James presents them, a “very modern quality” that detaches itself and becomes “objective,” allowing Isabel to see her own disappointments in a new light. First, “in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness” becomes a “less unnatural catastrophe”; second, surrounded by things that have “crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright,” she discovers a “companionship in endurance” that reinforces and enlarges her commitment to herself by making it a commitment to doing all that she can to rescue Pansy, until toward the end she becomes something like Pansy’s earthly “guardian angel.”

In these interrelated discoveries, we observe the return of several things that Isabel has denied. The staying power of the denied as well as of the past is a part of what she learns for herself and teaches us about Osmond’s world. In this way James reminds us that works of literature achieve one of their tasks by embracing the public thought of their time. This was not a new lesson, of course, but it was necessary, in part because it enabled James to remind us that a novel can expose the secret fears and hopes of an age even if it cannot resolve them. Only by confronting her own complicity and her own limitations
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can Isabel hope to find a way of countering Merle’s duplicities and Osmond’s manipulations and a way of replacing her empty dream of the “infinite vista of a multiplied life” with possibilities open to an implicated, conflicted, and used self. What Isabel thus inches her way toward resembles what James calls, in his preface to The Lesson of the Master, “the high and helpful public and, as it were, civic use of the imagination.”

James was drawn to the drama of such discoveries because he felt the need of them. His sense of mounting technical confidence finds expression in the brilliant manipulations of Merle and Osmond. His uncertainties and confusions, which were moral as well as aesthetic, find expression in Isabel’s predicament. As Isabel sits by the fire rereading her life, her problem emerges as a problem of perception, of consciousness, and, by extension, a problem of language. But it is also a problem of Isabel’s conception of herself as an autonomous agent. The moment her crisis draws attention to the tools and processes of consciousness, and then recasts the self as neither coherent unity nor conflicted multiplicity but rather as the play among these possibilities, Isabel becomes a modern protagonist. Our preference for her over Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle can be put in several ways. But it turns on her refusal to let disappointments, or more drastically “ruins,” rob her of will and her refusal to let proliferating ambiguities and uncertainties persuade her that moral judgments always mask self-interest – the cynical position that Merle and Osmond fix as one of the major temptations of the modern world.

In the world of the Portrait, the lyric desire for transcendence makes itself felt in Isabel’s longing to live the “infinite vista of a multiplied life” and in Ralph Touchett’s desire to see her rise above her world. But Isabel acquires as well a narrative impulse toward entanglement that squares more fully both with living in the encumbered worlds of historical societies and with becoming the heroine of a novel in which the story of the United States becomes entangled with that of the modern world. That story was scientific, technological, philosophical, political, aesthetic, and literary, in ways the Portrait never directly engages. Like modern science and technology, literary modernism emerged as a fast-moving affair, fueled by dislocations and upheavals as well as innovations. It would be played out in major cities of Russia, middle Europe, western Europe, England, and the United States, and also in villages in Minnesota, Mississippi, and Argentina. In the United States – a “half-savage country, out of date,” to borrow Pound’s words, populated by people from a hundred lands, uprooted and even rootless – two very different styles, geared to ironic reflection in a new age, would dominate narrative expression. One was Mark Twain’s discovery of the energy and cunning of vernacular English, particularly as expressed in the voice of Huckleberry Finn as he grapples with what it means to be enslaved or free, black or white, female or male, damned or saved. The other was James’s grand style, which had its origins in Isabel’s midnight vigil. In both of these, technical confidence would mingle with – and would serve both to counter and to stress – moral and spiritual confusions, evasions, and insights. We see them in the oblique confessions of Willa Cather’s