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1

A dream city, Lyric Years, and a Great War

I

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), Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925), Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* (1938), and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). 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, he added, that "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 the novel's 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 retained its tilt 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 a sordid or seamy consciousness, opened the novel to a fuller, less pretty psychology, the second move maintained the novel's commitment to the force of history – and that, as Robert Frost might have said, has made all the difference.

The modern 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 readers against the novel, fearing that its allegiance to the historical, material world it purported to represent would 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 male insecurities and anxieties – changed society. But they also changed fiction by deepening the alienation and the fascination that 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 tending to become their own absolutes. Writers and artists began thinking of their works as autotelic at least in part because their age was so convincingly dominated by forces other than the arts.

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 also 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 continuities or, more accurately, with their loss, which became a great theme of James, as well as of 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 because they regularly related what they knew in stories, their lives acquired historical meaning as parts of a larger cultural narrative, though it might be oral rather than written. As a result, their lives lent themselves to and even acquired a sense of formal fictional narrative. Cities, by contrast, like modern capitalist economies, celebrated the new and the present and thus the temporary. 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. But 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 that economic abundance was playing in shaping his 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 singularly 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 to speak or any known language to convey. 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 increasingly 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. Seizing these tasks as art's challenge was Mark Twain's great achievement; living out their consequences became 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.