

---

---

## *Introduction*

---

---

### *The nature of inheritance*

---

---

The news in July 1915 that Henry James was contemplating becoming a British citizen was greeted by the *New York Times* with irritation that the writer should wish to make such a change and with certainty that he would decide, finally, to remain an American. Prior to any official announcement, the paper published an editorial under the title ‘Are We To Lose Henry James?’ There it lamented that although during the author’s long exile in Europe ‘he has become thoroughly Anglicized in his tastes and his point of view’, it was nonetheless incredible that James should wish to perform such a public casting-off of what could now, after all, only be ‘the empty symbol of allegiance’. Conceding to a degree the viability of James’s dissatisfaction with his native land (America’s lack of commitment in the First World War – she would not participate until April 1917), the *Times* suggested that he nevertheless ought to feel proud of the relief work being undertaken by other (significantly) ‘real’ Americans. It concluded by predicting, more in hope than expectation, that the pull of the novelist’s New World roots would ultimately prove more powerful than any lengthy process of Europeanisation: ‘he is, after all, of such American stock as few have cared to disown. We fancy the memories of his New England ancestry and its precious traditions will keep him with us, after all.’<sup>1</sup> When report of James’s decision to transfer his citizenship reached New York, the *Times* printed a further, more critical piece, characterising the author as ‘one of those agreeable cosmopolitans’ that Americans, ‘with their much more salient character, their genuineness’, nevertheless all too foolishly rush to admire. The paper rather reluctantly concluded, in very Jamesian language, that ‘to the literary man choice of his scene is to be granted’.<sup>2</sup> Others less cosseted, it implied, did not have such a luxury.

That James felt uncomfortable with any crude definition of patriotism – of nationality defined as the public and collective manifestation of

apparently stable and homogenous individual identity – is evident in his critique in the British magazine *Literature* of a collection of articles published in 1897 by the future American president Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, the self-cultivated embodiment of the strenuous life and advocate of a vigorous policy of American expansionism, had been highly disparaging of James in an address delivered to the Brooklyn Young Republican Club some thirteen years earlier, in 1884. The *New York Times* had reported the speech the following day.

Plenty of men were willing to complain of the evils of our system of politics, but were not willing to lift a finger to remedy them. Mr Roosevelt said that his hearers had read to their sorrow the works of Henry James. He bore the same relation to other literary men that a poodle did to other dogs. The poodle had his hair combed and was somewhat ornamental, but never useful. He was invariably ashamed to imitate the British lion.

Effete and decorative, Henry James and his kind ‘were possessed of refinement and culture to see what was wrong’ but yet displayed none of ‘the robust virtues that would enable them to come out and do . . . right’.<sup>3</sup> James at the time seems to have made no response to Roosevelt’s attack, other than to write the following month to Grace Norton, the wife of his sometime editor Charles Eliot Norton, to request more details of its substance: ‘I have heard nothing, & know nothing, of it. I never look at the American papers – I find them . . . intolerable.’<sup>4</sup> Whether this information from his correspondent was forthcoming is unknown. What is clear is that Roosevelt’s 1897 collection, *American Ideals: And Other Essays Social and Political*, offered James the opportunity to respond in public to a political and cultural philosophy which he found deeply distasteful.

He was particularly interested in Roosevelt’s essay ‘True Americanism’ (1894), the content of which, although not mentioning James specifically, elaborated on the ideas and imagery of the earlier criticism of him (and rehearsed the unfavourable publicity he would receive in 1915). For Roosevelt, Americanisation entailed a process of absolute redefinition of identity in which all trace of European inheritance was washed away. Of the ever-growing number of American immigrants he declared: ‘We must Americanize them in every way, in speech, in political ideas and principles, and in their way of looking at relations between Church and State. We welcome the German or the Irishman who becomes an American. We have no such use for the German or Irishman who remains such.’<sup>5</sup> Such a conception of American identity was founded on recognisable Anglo-Saxon traits that had been most abundant during the Revolutionary period. The historian Jack Pole has argued that Roosevelt ‘believed that the character of the American nationality was fixed in the period from 1776 to 1787’, and that as a result ‘all subsequent mingling was a

process of continued assimilation into the original type'.<sup>6</sup> Americanness was conceived as something empirical and attainable, a single identity to be achieved once the 'spirit of colonial dependence' (23) had been expunged. As in the *Times* editorial following James's change of citizenship, cosmopolitanism was singled out for criticism, for it produced a 'flaccid habit of mind' which 'disqualif[ies] a man from doing good work in the world' (21). Roosevelt offered a sketch of one afflicted with such a disability that serves equally well as a more forceful variation on the 1915 judgement of James's apparently wavering patriotism:

Thus it is with the undersized man of letters, who flees his country because he, with his delicate effeminate sensitiveness, finds the conditions of life on this side of the water crude and raw; in other words, because he finds that he cannot play a man's part among men, and so goes where he will be sheltered from the winds that harden stouter souls. This *émigré* may write graceful and pretty verses, essays, novels; but he will never do work to compare with that of his brother, who is strong enough to stand on his own feet, and do his work as an American. (24–5)

Roosevelt's explicit agenda here is, in Martha Banta's neat phrase, to assail 'the scandal of failed masculinity'.<sup>7</sup> The expatriate writer, characteristically for Roosevelt always male, displays an unnatural femininity verging on total emasculation (he is sensitive and 'undersized'), far removed geographically and temperamentally from the rugged braveries of the New World exemplar. *This* figure, released from the enervating temptations of Europe, is proud 'to stand on his own feet . . . as an American'. Such an image of upright authoritativeness was one which Roosevelt went out of his way to promote. A contributor in 1917 to the socialist magazine *The Masses*, a publication generally unsympathetic to the now ex-president, described this strategy of self-fashioning and its embeddedness within an expansionist and nationalist ideology. Roosevelt's return to a kind of performative naturalness masked the triumph of 'civilised' American values:

[Roosevelt] goes in for the strenuous life, and becomes our main apostle of virility. When occasion offers, he naturally assumes the role of the cowboy, because the cowboy is highly symbolic of the vital type . . . Next, in the Spanish War, he appears as a rough rider; a distinct promotion in the scale of virility, the rough rider being in essence the cowboy plus the added feature of participation in the virile game of war. Later on, as an explorer, playing with jungles and living among wild men and beasts, he approaches still nearer to the primitive male.<sup>8</sup>

'The Strenuous Life', a speech delivered in 1899, is Roosevelt's *locus classicus* of this potent combination of self-definition and national destiny. 'I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life', it began, 'the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife.'<sup>9</sup>

America's new role in the world, one which it had to fulfil to become 'a really great people' (6), was to 'build up our power without our own borders', to 'enable us to have our say in deciding the destiny of the oceans of the East and West' (9). To achieve this would require the suppressing of 'the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting masterful virtues' (6) in favour of one in full possession of 'those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life' (2).

Henry James's relations with Roosevelt were complex and shifting. He could write to Edith Wharton in 1905, after a dinner at the White House, of his fascination with 'Theodore I' (as he titled him), whose energy and constant self-displaying he likened, not uncritically, to both 'a wonderful little machine . . . destined to be overstrained, perhaps, but not as yet, truly, betraying the least creak' and the brash spectacle of a shop-front window on Broadway.<sup>10</sup> To Wharton's sister-in-law, Mary Cadwalder Jones, James wrote about the same episode in more effusive terms, but again caught the note of presidential performativity: 'Theodore Rex is at any rate a really extraordinary creature for native intensity, veracity and *bonhomie* – he plays his part with the best will in the world and I recognise his amusing likeability' (*Letters*, iv, 337). Yet the imperial nature of Roosevelt's administration worried James, such that elsewhere he could refer to him as 'a dangerous and ominous Jingo' (*Letters*, iv, 202). James's critique of *American Ideals* is a variation on this anxiety. Roosevelt's assertion that 'it is "purely as an American" . . . that each of us must live and breathe' earns James's ridicule for its assumption that the 'American' name is a 'symbol revealed once for all in some book of Mormon dug up under a tree'. In an age in which peoples are no longer isolated or homogenous, in which so much effort has been made 'to multiplying contact and communication, to reducing separation and distance, to promoting, in short, an inter-penetration that would have been the wonder of our fathers', Roosevelt's belief in a superior and singular American type displays a reductive perception akin, for James, to wearing 'a pair of smart, patent blinders'. This is not to suggest that James is an advocate of the new technologies which had reduced the size of the globe; he is enough of a cultural conservative to fear that 'we may have been great fools to invent the post office, the newspaper and the railway, all manifestations of 'a Frankenstein monster at whom our simplicity can only gape'. But Roosevelt's solution in turn 'leaves us gaping' (*EAE*, 664). Whatever value Roosevelt's thoughts may have on the other issues with which his volume deals – civil service reform, the New York police department, political machinations at the highest levels – he is finally impaired 'by the puerility of his simplifications' (*EAE*, 665).

Writing to his brother William in 1888, James had famously declared his belief in 'a big AngloSaxon total' in which individual nationalities were

‘destined to such an amount of melting together’ that to argue for ghettoised difference and uniqueness would be an ‘idle & pedantic’ exercise (*Letters*, III, 244). Although such a holistic approach to nationality would later come under some pressure in the New York of *The American Scene* (1907) (where melting becomes bleaching, and homogeneity rather than inclusive difference is identified as the insidious national goal), here James advocates a co-mingling of the individual and national identity, where fusion does not undermine individuality but rather serves to enhance the nation-state by its presence. Against Roosevelt, James’s conception of the patriotic impulse is regarded as a ‘privilege’ (*EAE*, 665); it becomes something inclusive, more comfortable in incorporating alternative and diverse allegiances than insisting upon a narrowly conceived notion of ‘national consciousness’, the ‘screws’ of which Roosevelt had attempted to tighten ‘as they have never been tightened before’ (*EAE*, 663). ‘National consciousness’ was a phrase which James had used twice before – on these occasions in a positive context – to characterise the sensibility of his friend James Russell Lowell.<sup>11</sup> With Lowell, James writes, ‘the national consciousness had never elsewhere been so cultivated’ (*EAE*, 546). It was flexible and permeable enough to incorporate alternatives: Lowell’s ‘main care for the New England . . . consciousness, as he embodied it, was that it could be fed from as many sources as any other in the world, and assimilate them with an ingenuity all its own: literature, life, poetry, art, wit, all the growing experience of human intercourse’ (*EAE*, 547). This national consciousness, although unwaveringly ‘intense’, nevertheless manifested itself as a form of patriotism which Lowell ‘could play with’; he was able ‘to make it various’, such that he avoided what James identified as the New England danger of provincialism – ‘shutting himself up in his birth-chamber’ (*EAE*, 518, 533).

Theodore Roosevelt’s equating of his much more politicised ideal of the New World citizen with images of sturdy self-reliance points to the degree to which the American conception of individualism, as identified by Alexis de Tocqueville and celebrated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, continued to influence hegemonic national self-definition. In addition to the blunt topographical fact of American existence – the identification, physical mapping and settlement of a previously uncharted land – the *concept* of the country as embodying a vision of self-invention and democratic equality provided an eloquent and resonant vocabulary with which the national history might be written. Daniel Walker Howe has remarked that Thomas Jefferson’s ‘pursuit of happiness’ sanctified the right of each American to decide what kind of person he or she wished to become: ‘that is, the belief that ordinary men and women have a dignity and value in their own right, and that they are sufficiently trustworthy to be allowed a measure of autonomy in their lives’.<sup>12</sup> Individualism was a constitutional

given, but as such was prone to the kind of adoption by institutional and capitalist America for ends which bore little resemblance to its formulation in Emersonian idealism. Seymour Martin Lipset, in his recent study of the continuing effects of enshrined individualism on American politics and culture, notes that ‘the national classical liberal ideology’ served to sustain an American economy ‘characterized by more market freedom, more individual landownership, and a higher wage income structure . . . [I]t was the *laissez-faire* country par excellence . . . [in which] hard work and economic ambition were perceived as the proper activity of a moral person.’<sup>13</sup> As I shall show, this alliance of ideal with inevitably tarnished economic practice was one which Emerson had to carefully negotiate; for others it signified a fatal myopia inherent in the ideal of individualism itself.

Emerson had characterised Boston in 1861 as ‘the town which was appointed in the destiny of nations to lead the civilization of North America’. Its pre-eminent position, he asserted, was founded on ‘principles not of yesterday’ but rather those which ‘will always prevail over whatever material accumulations’ (*CWE*, XII, 188, 209). That on a wider level New England still represented metonymically a repository of fine and defining American values too important to disown is evident in the 1915 *Times* editorial. There, if we recall, James’s New England ancestry with its ‘precious traditions’ was cited as the decisive argument for his retaining his citizenship, ensuring his rejection, even if only symbolically, of the superficial ‘material accumulations’ of Europe. Of course, the simple biographical fact that James was born in New York, a city of such importance to him that he sought to memorialise it in his Edition, is ignored by the writer of the piece, who chooses to relocate James *culturally* in the native idealism of an Emersonian America rather than acknowledge his actual roots in, and continuing attachment to, the heterogeneous metropolis. James’s immediate ancestor, his father the religious philosopher Henry James Senior, although an intimate of Emerson, Bronson Alcott and others in the vanguard of American Romanticism, rejected the lauding of the individual self characteristic of Emersonian transcendentalism. This asserted that in an America perceived as discovered by each person anew, each could possess the world in his or her own image, to the extent that the dialectic of self and ‘other’ is dissolved – everything is a manifestation of self and therefore potentially comprehensible to it. A characteristic instance of James Senior’s repudiation of this privileging of the solitary can be found in a series of letters he wrote to the *New York Tribune* newspaper between November 1852 and January 1853. His principal adversary in the columns of the *Tribune*, Stephen Pearl Andrews, was a radical socialist who had established a utopian community on Long Island in 1851 and was now advocating the complete repeal of

all marriage laws under the principle of the absolute 'Sovereignty of the Individual'. 'What is the limit up to which Man', Andrews asked, 'simply in virtue of being man, is entitled, of right, to the exercise of freedom, without the interference of Society, or – which is the same thing – of other individuals?'<sup>14</sup> His answer, reiterated throughout the correspondence, was unequivocal: democracy was 'the right of every individual to govern himself' (43). For that to be possible, each individual was obliged to establish 'the exact limits of encroachment' between himself and his neighbour, 'religiously refraining from passing those limits, and mildly or forcibly restraining [the neighbour] from doing so' (81).

This assertion was the secular – one might say tangible – extension of Emerson's spiritualised manifesto of self-reliance. Emerson's belief that only through the cultivation of 'the integrity of your own mind' can one hope for 'the suffrage of the world' (*CWE*, x, 50) becomes something more systematised and concrete in Andrews's image of absolute self-government: 'I claim individually to be my own nation. I take this opportunity to declare my National Independence, and to notify all other potentates, that they may respect my Sovereignty' (62). As Carl Guarneri has remarked in his study of the American utopian impulse, Andrews's theory 'rested on the conventional liberal faith that if left completely to themselves, individuals would prosper and the whole society benefit'.<sup>15</sup> Emerson would not have disagreed with that; indeed the self-proclaimed anarchic individualism of Andrews has been identified as existing at the heart of Emerson's philosophy too, especially by early Marxist readers of American literature such as V. F. Calverton and Granville Hicks. For such a politically inflected criticism, eloquent and elegant essays on self-reliance and personal independence could not hide the fact that Emerson was unprepared for the tangible results of his words, words which lent credence to a political and economic bias unwilling to promote social cohesion and communal responsibility.<sup>16</sup> Even more than Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond, Andrews had taken the Concord writer's poetic philosophising to the point of actual implementation, to the point at which an unempirical belief (such as Emerson's) in individual progress was deemed to be insufficient. 'Vague notions of the natural goodness of man', Andrews warned, were 'no guarantee of right action' (44). What was needed was the recognition that reformers 'have a Science to study and a definite work to perform . . . not a mere senseless, and endless, and aimless agitation to maintain' (12). Andrews represents the professionalisation of what he considered to be the ineffective, somewhat dilettante efforts of his reformist contemporaries. His unswerving belief in individualism as 'the profoundest, and most valuable, and most transcendently important principle of political and social order' (41) achieved widespread expression in the pages of a popular New York newspaper and was acted

out with fellow adherents on Long Island; Thoreau's embodiment of self-reliance, by contrast, had been practised in sylvan isolation and relative obscurity.

James Senior's response to Andrews's lionisation of the individual was to express his contrary belief that 'the best aspiration of the individual man is bound up with the progress of society' (60). Directly opposing the reification of the self, he declared: 'I can conceive of no "individual sovereignty" which precedes a man's perfect adjustment to nature and society' (57). Only through the development of a christianised community which recognised that individual selfhoods are transitory and inadequate could humankind hope to achieve spiritual redemption. James Senior hoped for men 'no longer visible or cognizable to God in their *atomic individualities*, but only as so many *social units*, each embracing and enveloping all in affection and thought'.<sup>17</sup> The philosophies of both Emerson and Andrews displayed, to his mind, an arrogant spiritual immaturity which mistakenly insisted upon the primacy of the individual, innocently cocooned in self-confident isolation from the potentially troublesome and conflicted realities of the wider community. John Jay Chapman, discussing Emerson in a volume of essays of 1898, focuses on just this sense of stasis and fixity in the Concord writer's thinking. Comparing him to the poetic genius of Robert Browning, who 'regards character as the result of experience and as ever changing growth', Chapman notes how Emerson conceives of it as 'rather an entity complete and eternal from the beginning. He is probably the last great writer to look at life from a stationary standpoint.'<sup>18</sup> James reviewed Chapman's book for the *Literature* magazine, considering the essay on Emerson to be 'the most effective critical attempt made in the United States, or I should suppose anywhere, really to get near the philosopher of Concord' (*EAE*, 687). Much as James himself had done in his *Hawthorne* (1879), Chapman argued that 'the New England spirit in prose and verse was, on a certain side, wanting in life' (*EAE*, 688). 'Life' in its present complexities and uncertainties was what Emerson's philosophy seemed to transcend. As Richard Poirier has described it, Emersonianism was characterised by its ceaseless *futurity*, an 'apparent obliviousness to the present circumstance, [a] living into the future', beyond the reach of the fetters of historical and social laws.<sup>19</sup> In discussing the relationship between both Henry Jameses and Emerson I want to illustrate the extent to which the certainties of the transcendental self were deemed inadequate for the spiritual reflections of the father and the fictional explorations of the son. For both men, it was the flawed individual, able to accept indeterminacy and error, who was best able to progress beyond the false sureties of the self.

The philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, acquaintance of James Senior, William, and Henry, coined the term *fallibilism* for this attitude of radical uncertainty, describing it thus in 1887:



I used for myself to collect my ideas under the designation *fallibilism*; and indeed the first step toward *finding out* is to acknowledge you do not satisfactorily know already; so that no blight can so surely arrest all intellectual growth as the blight of cocksureness; . . . Indeed, out of a contrite fallibilism, combined with a high degree of faith in the reality of knowledge, and an intense desire to find things out, all my philosophy has always seemed to me to grow.<sup>20</sup>

The mystical self-confidence of American transcendentalism had earned Peirce's scorn – the Concord movement was a 'virus' against which the more academically rigorous 'atmosphere of Cambridge held many an antiseptic'.<sup>21</sup> Insistent doubt, he suggested, resisted the acquisition of such relaxed assurances, for '[w]e cannot be absolutely certain that our conclusions are even approximately true'.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, unlike the Emersonian credo of self-reliance, Peirce's understanding of individual growth depended upon the existence of a shared communality sensitive to expansion, one flexible (and indeed fallible) enough to incorporate alternative and discordant elements. Reality, Peirce argued, 'essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge'.<sup>23</sup>

A close examination of James Senior's writings and sensitive readings of his son's fiction illustrate the extent to which, although Peirce may have formulated the concept, the embrace of fallibility was an essential stage in the epistemological process for both men.<sup>24</sup> Thus it is curious that what critical attention has been paid to the relationship between father and son has tended to gloss over the very considerable differences between James Senior and American transcendentalism, instead claiming both James and his father as fellow Emersonians. Quentin Anderson argued in his highly influential *The Imperial Self* (1971) that James, along with Emerson and Walt Whitman, displayed his representative Americanness through a 'profound extrasocial commitment' which 'ignores, elides, or transforms history, politics, . . . the hope for purposive change'.<sup>25</sup> The novelist's focus, Anderson suggested, was exclusively on 'the absolutism of the self' (ix), a solipsistic withdrawal from the complexities of the 'institutions and emotional dispositions of associated life' (3). Moreover responsibility for such a retreat lay with the fathers of this generation of writers, men who 'their sons did not accept . . . as successful in filling the role popularly assigned them' (15). The removal of the cultural authority of the father, Anderson claimed, directly, and detrimentally, affected the degree to which the fate of the son was 'bound up with the fate of the polity' (16). Anderson's concern for the apparently ahistorical strain in James sits uneasily with his analysis of the novelist in an earlier and much more eccentric book, *The American Henry James* (1957). There he went to extreme lengths to argue that James adopted wholesale his father's blend of transcendentalism and Swedenborgianism to produce an elaborate allegorical playing-out of James Senior's philosophical

system. Choosing to ignore those novels which did not fit in with his thesis of seamless correspondence (*pace The Imperial Self*, texts such as *The Europeans*, *Washington Square*, and *The Bostonians* are rejected on the basis that they are *too* dependent upon ‘the historically grounded attitudes of the time and place of the story’),<sup>26</sup> Anderson made some large claims for the degree of influence: ‘Henry Junior . . . seems to have swallowed his father’s psychology whole’ (59); ‘The younger son is, to my knowledge, the only man who has ever *used* the elder James’s beliefs’ (67). It soon becomes clear why many of the novelist’s earlier works are discarded, for Anderson chooses to concentrate on James’s late phase, which represents for him an allegorical trilogy depicting the phases of religious regeneration identified by James Senior. Thus the father’s somewhat prejudiced understanding of Judaism is represented in *The Ambassadors* by Woollett’s New England moralism; *The Wings of the Dove* embodies the Christian church with Milly Theale as its saviour; and *The Golden Bowl* illustrates the apotheosis of a Swedenborgian New Jerusalem, with the reconciliation of Maggie Verver and the Prince symbolising the harmonious joining of the world’s contraries. Such a rigid and linear interpretation of highly complex and ambiguous narratives is flawed even before it begins its rather predictable trajectory if we remember that Henry James chose to place *The Ambassadors* second of the three novels in the New York edition, after *The Wings of the Dove*, thus disrupting Anderson’s conceptual order.

More recent critics continue to locate James both as a novelist influenced by philosophical discourse and as one whose work is amenable to interpretation through certain later philosophical formulations. Richard A. Hocks’s study of the relationship between Henry and his brother William suggested a striking congruity between the novelist’s work and William’s pragmatist thought, such that the latter’s philosophy is ‘literally *actualized* in the literary art and idiom of Henry’.<sup>27</sup> In his detailed and convincing commentary on the voluminous correspondence between the two brothers, Hocks summarises his project with the bold assertion that ‘William does the naming, Henry the embodying’ (225). Paul B. Armstrong offers a phenomenological reading of James, drawing on an eclectic range of theorists (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) to discuss the novelist’s structuring of experience and consciousness. He makes no reference to James Senior however, a surprising omission which is especially felt in his discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady* and the connection he makes between it and William James’s ideas of freedom and necessity.<sup>28</sup> While his linking of the novel to William is useful and clarifying, Armstrong seems unaware that the same concepts which he finds in the brother’s philosophy had also been discussed at length by James Senior. He illustrates what seems to be a reluctance amongst critics to grapple with the father’s admittedly complex and often confusing