

HENRY JAMES
THE AMERICAN SCENE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47117-6 — The American Scene
Henry James , Edited by Peter Collister
Excerpt
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PREFACE

THE following pages duly explain themselves, I judge, as to the Author's point of view and his relation to his subject; but I prefix this word on the chance of any suspected or perceived failure of such references. My visit to America had been the first possible to me for nearly a quarter of a century, and I had before my last previous one, brief and distant to memory, spent other years in continuous absence; so that I was to return with much of the freshness of eye, outward and inward, which, with the further contribution of a state of desire, is commonly held a precious agent of perception.¹ I felt no doubt, I confess, of my great advantage on that score; since if I had had time to become almost as "fresh" as an inquiring stranger, I had not on the other hand had enough to cease to be, or at least to feel, as acute as an initiated native.² I made no scruple of my conviction that I should understand and should care better and more than the most earnest of visitors, and yet that I should vibrate³ with more curiosity — on the extent of ground, that

¹ HJ's departure from London's Waterloo Station for Southampton was uncomfortable, 'horrible for crowd and confusion (passengers for ship so in their *thousands* ... (mainly of rich German-American Jews!)' (letter to Lucy Clifford, 16 September 1904, *LHJ* 2: 18). He arrived at Hoboken, New Jersey on 30 August 1904 aboard the recently built (1903) *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, one of the fastest steamships in the world (see Arnold Kludas, *Record Breakers of the North Atlantic: Blue Riband Liners 1838–1952* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2000), pp. 22–3, 87, 92–4). His previous visits to America had been in November 1881–May 1882 and December 1882–September 1883. During the first of these extended stays his mother had died and his father died just before his arrival for the second. In 1904, HJ was met on the dock by his nephew (WJ's son), Harry, Henry Jr, a gesture anticipated with gratitude by HJ: 'I can't tell you how I thank you for offering me your manly chest to hurl myself upon in the event of my alighting on the New York dock, four or five weeks hence, in abject and craven terror — which I foresee as a certainty; so that I accept without shame or scruple the beautiful and blessed offer of aid and comfort that you make me' (letter to Henry James Jr, 26 July 1904, *LHJ* 2: 16). The voyage on the 'colossal' ship took five days and thirteen hours (*CWJ* 3: 278).

² When pondering a title for this volume, HJ regretted that 'The Return of the Native' had already been used by Thomas Hardy for his 1878 novel.

³ This is a term much favoured by HJ in AS, suggesting an excited physical responsiveness to the sights and sounds of this much changed continent.

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is, on which I might aspire to intimate intelligence at all – than the pilgrim⁴ with the longest list of questions, the sharpest appetite for explanations and the largest exposure to mistakes.

I felt myself then, all serenely, not exposed to grave mistakes – though there were also doubtless explanations which would find me, and quite as contentedly, impenetrable. I would take my stand on my gathered impressions, since it was all for them, for them only, that I returned; I would in fact go to the stake for them – which is a sign of the value that I both in particular and in general attach to them and that I have endeavoured to preserve for them in this transcription.⁵ My cultivated sense of aspects and prospects affected me absolutely as an enrichment of my subject, and I was prepared to abide by the law of that sense – the appearance that it would react promptly in some presences only to remain imperturbably inert in others. There would be a thousand matters – matters already the theme of prodigious reports and statistics – as to which I should have no sense whatever, and as to information about which my record would accordingly stand naked and unashamed. It should unfailingly be proved against me that my opportunity had found me incapable of information, incapable alike of receiving and of imparting it; for then, and then only, would it be clearly enough attested that I *had* cared and understood.

There are features of the human scene, there are properties of the social air, that the newspapers, reports, surveys and blue-books⁶ would seem to confess themselves powerless to “handle,” and that yet represented to me a greater array of items, a heavier expression of character, than my own pair of scales would ever weigh, keep them as clear for it as I might. I became aware soon enough, on the spot, that these elements of the human subject, the results of these attempted appreciations of life itself, would prove much too numerous even for a capacity all given to them for some ten months; but at least therefore, artistically concerned as I had been all my days with

⁴ The trope of the pilgrim, often pursuing aesthetic experience, is constant in HJ’s writing. See, for instance, his early novella, ‘A Passionate Pilgrim’ (1871).

⁵ HJ regularly emphasizes this self-characterization so that the ‘impression’ denotes the chief formal and aesthetic practice of this work; aside from helping determine genre, it moves expectations away from the idea of documentary record or travelogue.

⁶ Publications or almanacs including statistics and information, in the United Kingdom often published by Parliament.

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the human subject, with the appreciation of life itself, and with the consequent question of literary representation, I should not find such matters scant or simple. I was not in fact to do so, and they but led me on and on. How far this might have been my several chapters show; and yet even here I fall short. I shall have to take a few others for the rest of my story.⁷

H. J.

⁷ It was HJ's original intention to publish a second volume, titled *The Sense of the West* (Michael Anesko, 'James in America: In Quest of (the) Material', *Cambridge Quarterly* 37.1 (2008), 12), which would record his impressions of the Midwest and the west coast; however, it was never completed.