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## Introduction

MARTHA BANTA

WHEN Henry James began work on *The American* in 1875, he was impelled by three interconnected needs, all to do with finding the “right forms.” He had to give shape to his nascent career by driving it forward in the direction that would best enhance his reputation as a promising young writer; he had to decide what authorial perspective to take on the material he treated in his narrative and whether to guide it toward the literary genre of the romance (locus of the fanciful) or the novel (seat of the realist); he had to define to his own satisfaction what the American character was in relation, first, to the United States, which he perceived as essentially formless, and, second, to a foreign culture whose historical forms were all too rigidly in place.

It was mid-1876 by the time James completed his story of Christopher Newman, the freewheeling American millionaire abroad in the Paris where James had felt himself at odds. While James was busy raising questions about where habits of independence and self-reliance got a man like Newman and pursuing his unofficial exposition of the meaning of “the American,” his compatriots were gathering back home in Philadelphia to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of the nation’s severance from the Old World in 1776. Many were responding with patriotic pride to the lavishly stocked exhibition halls of the 1876 centennial, which appeared to give credence to the belief that the United States had come very far very fast over the past century – as a growing political power, as the catalyst for astonishing technological achievements, and as the champion of a democratic culture. The good people across the ocean from James were flushed with self-congratulation as they passed through the official displays, finding

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there affirmation of the national unity they liked to think that the North had snatched from the jaws of hell during the Civil War concluded ten years earlier. The American types described in the news media of the day were pleased to observe that the overt making of big wars had been replaced by the making and spending of big money and the enhancement of a peaceful, prosperous, and virtuous society.

In order for such assertions of national pride to be made, blind eyes had to be turned upon the kinds of warfare still in evidence from coast to coast: in the Reconstruction South, where newly emancipated blacks struggled to hold on to their meager gains in civil affairs in spite of the ominous light cast on the night skies by burning crosses lit by the Ku Klux Klan; in the western territories, where sweeps against the resisting Indian tribes were made (not always successfully, as General George Custer's debacle at Little Big Horn demonstrated) by army troops ordered to free the lands for white development; in the ornate boardrooms and smoky back rooms of the eastern power brokers, whose self-interested manipulations of the *Crédit Mobilier* and the Tweed Ring stole large sums of money from the shareholders of the Union Pacific Railroad and the treasury of New York City; in the railroad yards and coal mines banding the industrial states on the eve of the bloody strikes that would warn of anarchic social elements on the loose; in the silver fields of Nevada, where the excitement of flush times was followed by overnight busts and panics, both financial and psychological. Yes, on the American side of the Atlantic, the citizenry had either to acknowledge or to ignore the fact that it was well-nigh impossible to bring the official images of the progressive, unified, contented American character endorsed by the Philadelphia centennial to line with the ever-present expressions – sometimes violent, usually disquieting – of the random nature of American life.

Removed from these battlefronts back in the United States as he may have been, James's multifold search for necessary forms deeply involved him in his own campaign to wrest order out of confusion. At the same time, he needed to advance his career as a writer by selecting the fictional form that would satisfy his readers as well as the high literary standards he had already set for himself.

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To bring about this double coup, James also had to push ahead with what turned out to be his lifelong search to determine what it means to be an American writing about the primary American types. By being alert to the aims and accomplishments of this thirty-two-year-old writer, we gain a history that places *The American* within its cultural and social context and in relation to the arc of James's development as a major American author.

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In 1875 Henry James was in Paris and on his own. At thirty-two he was no longer the Small Boy later portrayed in the first volume of his memoirs as one who had been trundled about Europe during the 1840s and 1850s; he was no longer the direct object of his father's well-intentioned but whimsical experiments in an education that was meant to be vague enough to protect the five James children from achieving any kind of conventional success. James in 1875 was still, however, the junior Henry James and would sign himself thus until his father's death in 1883. He was still tied to the strings of a parental allowance that allowed his nature insufficient economic and emotional play. He could not call himself his own man until he attained the full financial independence that would come about only when his writings supported him entirely.

James had been a practicing writer since 1864. Over the next eleven years he produced a series of literary reviews, the fictional romances that appeared in 1875 under the collective title of *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales*, and the travel pieces (also published in 1875) published as *Transatlantic Sketches*. His first big work – the novel *Roderick Hudson*, which he had commenced in Florence in 1873 and completed at his parents' home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the winter of 1874–5 – was appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* as a serial at the time he recrossed the ocean to arrive in Paris in November 1875 – returning, in fact, to Europe for good. He had chosen his special vocation in 1864; now he chose the continent where he must manifest his fate as an American writer living abroad. "My choice is the old world – my choice, my need, my life," he wrote in his notebooks of 1881. "God knows that I have now no time to waste," he was still

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cautioning himself six years after that disembarkment of November 1875, as he would continue to admonish himself until his death in 1916.<sup>1</sup>

The pressures upon James to make his literary mark must have seemed especially arduous in 1875. Active as he had been in producing his reviews, travel sketches, apprentice tales, and first novel, he knew he could not pause for a moment if he were to keep himself financially afloat. Before coming to France he had made arrangements with Whitelaw Reid of the *New York Tribune* to contribute a series of letters appraising the Parisian scene, but he was gently released from his assignment by the summer of 1876 after twenty letters and payments from Reid amounting to \$400. His reports on Paris, couched in the descriptive style he had developed for his earlier magazine pieces, proved unsuitable for the *Tribune's* journalistic needs. He had not yet found the form appropriate for audiences other than those of *The Nation* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, with which he was familiar. James had never thought to place all of his professional eggs in Reid's basket, however. He was in Paris not three weeks when he sent a letter to F. P. Church, the editor of *The Galaxy*, proposing a novel-length serial under the title of *The American*. When *The Galaxy* did not respond to his suggestion, he immediately entered into a contractual agreement with William Dean Howells, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Howells eagerly cleared the way for his magazine to receive the rights to the story James had momentarily laid aside as the result of the disappointing silence on the part of *The Galaxy*.<sup>2</sup>

James had been chastened and depressed by a letter of January 1876 from his mother that called him to task for his "extravagance" and the financial drain he was causing his father, in spite of the fact that he had sent the \$200 derived from the sale of *Transatlantic Sketches* directly home to Cambridge. James's response had been to press ahead to deliver two short romances, "Crawford's Consistency" and "The Ghostly Rental," to *Scribner's Magazine* for a fee of \$300. It was a great relief to him, therefore, to settle with Howells on the placement of *The American*, even though he was still far short of its completion when it first began to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly* in June 1876.

Though *The American* would run for twelve months and fetch

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James \$1,350 – enough to support him through 1876 – Leon Edel's biography details his continuing scramble during 1877; working at an accelerated pace, he produced ten essays for *The Galaxy*, three for *Lippincott's*, and still others for *The Nation* after his move to London at the end of 1876.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, James was seeing *The American* through its *Atlantic Monthly* serialization and its first publication as a book in April 1877 under the imprint of James R. Osgood of Boston. Like most authors in the days before the international copyright law went into effect in 1891, James had to stand by without legal recourse as unauthorized editions appeared in London in 1877 and Germany in 1877 and 1878. An authorized London edition (slightly altered from the Osgood text) was published by Macmillan in 1879, followed later by the inclusion of *The American* in Macmillan's collection of James's novels in 1883. The final appearance of the novel during James's lifetime came in 1907, featured as the second volume of Scribners New York Edition of James's major works.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of *that* edition – heavily revised by James in 1905 – are a story in itself and one that will be treated later in this introduction, as will the implications of James's conversion of the novel into a stage play in 1892 for the controversies that followed the compositional evolution of Christopher Newman's story.

While James was in Paris commencing work on *The American*, he had more on his mind than the very real need to ensure his financial stability and to place his writings before the public in short order. He was in the midst of an evaluation of the general relation of Americans to French culture and an assessment of the significance to his own art of the Parisian literary scene represented by Gustave Flaubert, Alphonse Daudet, Emile Zola, Edmond de Goncourt, and Guy de Maupassant, as well as by Ivan Turgenev, the visiting Russian; he was also absorbing the lessons afforded by the nighttime spectacles of the Paris theater, which, some suggest, directly influenced the plot of *The American* and certainly lay behind the choices he later made in the development of his "scenic" art.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, Honore de Balzac proved to be James's man rather than Flaubert or Maupassant; and also Turgenev, the writer who led James to commit himself to what one critic calls "that human-

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ist-aesthetic cosmopolitanism, that freedom from 'our Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, conventional morality' which he had so admired in Turgenev."<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, it was Turgenev who had first introduced James to Flaubert in December 1875, but by May 1876 James was writing Howells about his withdrawal from the group of French writers. "I have seen almost nothing of the literary fraternity, and there are fifty reasons why I should not become intimate with them. I don't like their wares, and they don't like any others; and besides, they are not *accueillants*. Turgenev is worth the whole heap of them."<sup>7</sup> The casual immorality condoned by the Flaubertian circle, the petty animosities of its members toward those who did not fully concur with their methods, the enginelike way in which they produced volumes of "limited perfection," and the seeming coldness and deadness of their hearts repelled James. The broad expansiveness of spirit he had found in Balzac's and Turgenev's writings was what James now realized he was after. *Cosmopolitanism*, in short.

What an odd position James found himself in, therefore, during the twelve months he spent in Paris delving deeper into his story of the American abroad. "I am turning into an old, and very contented Parisian," he informed Howells in a letter of May 1876.<sup>8</sup> "I feel as if I had struck roots into the Parisian soil, and were likely to let them grow tangled and tenacious there." Yet, he admitted, "Of pure Parisianism I see absolutely nothing." At the time, when expressing his feelings to Howells, James put a good face on the fact that he had no accepted place in French society and had denied himself the possibility of becoming allied with the newest French literary camp. Simply to be in Paris gave cheer, he asserted; Paris assured "that one can arrange one's life here exactly as one pleases – that there are facilities for every kind of habit and taste, and that everything is accepted and understood." This acute observer of the city's spectacle appreciated the fact that Paris was "a sort of painted background which keeps shifting and changing, and which is always there, to be looked at when you please, and to be most easily and comfortably ignored when you don't."

In 1875–6 James could liken himself to a member of a great audience enjoying the theatricality the city so brilliantly provided, but looking back from the vantage point of 1881, he admitted in

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the privacy of his notebooks that he had not much cared for the sense of estrangement he had experienced five years before.<sup>9</sup> Alone, because distanced from the parochialism of the French scene; alone, because he claimed no entree into the French social world; alone, because as an American abroad he had to depend upon “the little American ‘set’ – the American village encamped *en plein Paris*.” James admitted that his compatriots “knew up to a certain point their Paris,” but he judged their existence there to be “ineffably tiresome and unprofitable.” He was constantly beset by the type of American woman whom he was to represent (some-what more sympathetically) as Mrs. Tristram in *The American*: the kind who took upon herself “the right to judge” his movements. James felt trapped by “the detestable *American Paris*.” He could not possess the French Paris, and he was increasingly annoyed by those Americans who tried to possess him as part of “their Paris.” Realizing, “moreover, that I should be an eternal outsider,” he decided “to abandon my plans of indefinite residence, take flight to London and settle there as best I could.” So James departed for England in November 1876, one year after his arrival in Paris. Even though the early chapters of *The American* had already begun to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly* in June 1876, the final portions of the story were still unfinished when he crossed the English Channel. Indeed, James was still corresponding with Howells concerning the developments of the narrative through March 1877.

The twelve months that had launched the story of Christopher Newman’s confrontation with the “walls” of Parisian society marked a difficult period during which James himself had had to come to terms with those elements – internal as well as external – that seemed to prevent him from becoming the cosmopolitan man he urgently desired to be. Still, he had made several important discoveries: The parochialism he detested characterized the French literary clique as well as the tight little world of “the American ‘set’”; this same incapacity for cultural and personal breadth also existed, he would argue in *The American*, within the well-guarded minds and imprisoned lives of the aristocratic French society represented by the Bellegarde family.

Certain of the literary problems James had in forming his portrayal of Americans in relation to Parisian life arose from the fact

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that he had had to solve the “money question” by hurrying his story into print “somewhat prematurely” while still in the process of undergoing, in his own experience, the several stages of initiation thrust upon his fictional hero.<sup>10</sup> The occasional weaknesses that marred the narrative as the result of James’s failure to allow sufficient time to elapse before recollecting his Parisian impressions are offset by the stimulation to his imagination that came from his constantly having had to ask himself on the spot – *really* ask himself – what does it mean to be an American?

2

It is significant that Constance Rourke, who offered one of the first effective critical interpretations of *The American*, singled out James’s novel for its portrayal of “a whole society of typical individuals.” Rourke’s watershed study of 1931, *American Humor*, is subtitled “A Study of the National Character.” With this topic as her announced concern, it was right and fit that Rourke devoted an important segment of her book to the success of James’s treatment of the consummate type of the Yankee and to the power of “the complete fable” he provided in the figure of Christopher Newman.<sup>11</sup>

The notion that one can “know” the qualities of a nation by knowing the character classification of its citizenry is as old as the notion of nationalism. Even older (as ancient as the writings of the Greek physiognomists) is the conviction that it is advantageous to study the general type rather than the particulars of random individuals; or rather, the conviction that such individuals come into sharp focus when grouped according to classified social types. The conceptual trajectory between Theophrastus and the “character books” of the seventeenth century, and on to Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* of 1787, is strong and clear. The distance from Tyler’s comedy of manners, which pits the decent, unaffected, “natural” American against the hypocritical, pretentious fops of the Old World, to Christopher Newman confronting the arrogant, affected, moral decadents at the Bellegarde’s Paris soiree is no distance at all.

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Daisy Miller, the American Girl, together with her vague mother and her brother Randolph, with his brattish ways and sugar-rotted teeth, would emerge from James's imagination in 1879. Yankees beset by overnight wealth and uncertain taste stretched their long legs on the verandas of the resort hotels of Saratoga Springs in a piece he wrote for *The Nation* in 1870. Reticent New Englanders were set next to European sophisticates in his 1878 novel *The Europeans*, and 1881 found James cataloging an array of national types in *The Portrait of a Lady*. James had entered this important phase of his unfolding career by placing conscious emphasis upon the typical characteristics of his native Americans in contrast to, and in contest with, the European types he threw across their paths.

The opening pages of *The American* show James eyeing Newman's Lincolnesque physiognomy as intently as ever Melville examined the brow of Moby-Dick or as Hawthorne pored over Hester Prynne's scarlet A, but Melville's allegories of cosmic meaning and Hawthorne's symbols of humankind's complicity with sin and suffering are replaced on James's pages by the worldly immediacy of an observer with "an eye for national types."<sup>12</sup> This observer, in the narrator's words,

would have had no difficulty in determining the local origin of this undeveloped connoisseur, and indeed such an observer might have felt a certain humorous relish of the almost ideal completeness with which he filled out the national mould. The gentleman on the divan was a powerful specimen of an American. But he was not only a fine American; he was in the first place, physically, a fine man. (pp. 17–18)

At this point, sounding for all the world like the plethora of physiognomical manuals produced for a public with a marked taste for the classification of skulls, noses, and jawbones, James details the way Newman appears to the world:

He had a very well-formed head, with a shapely, symmetrical balance of the frontal and the occipital development, and a good deal of straight, rather dry brown hair. His complexion was brown, and his nose had a bold, well-marked arch. His eye was of a clear, cold gray, and save for a rather abundant moustache, he was clean-shaved. He had the flat jaw and sinewy neck which are frequent in

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the American type; but the traces of national origin are a matter of expression even more than of feature, and it was in this respect that our friend's countenance was supremely eloquent. (p. 18)

James's "discriminating observer" has his task of interpretation cut out for him, however, since "eloquence" – like any form of visual or verbal rhetoric – is difficult to deal with. One might "perfectly have measured" the American's countenance "and yet have been at a loss to describe it."

It had that typical vagueness which is not vacuity, that blankness which is not simplicity, that look of being committed to nothing in particular, of standing in an attitude of general hospitality to the chances of life, of being very much at one's own disposal, so characteristic of many American faces. (p. 18)

It was the American's eye that

chiefly told his story; an eye in which innocence and experience were singularly blended. It was full of contradictory suggestions. . . . you could find in it almost anything you looked for. . . . Decision, salubrity, jocosity, prosperity, seem to hover within his call; he is evidently a practical man, but the idea, in his case, has undefined and mysterious boundaries, which invite the imagination to bestir itself on his behalf. (pp. 18–19)

How characteristic of James's early manner of working with the national type this passage is. He urges upon the observer the need to classify in order to complicate; he delineates clearly defined visual categories in order to insinuate mystery and contradiction; with his checklist of viewable things, he acts as the social realist in order "to invite the imagination to bestir itself," and to bestir itself *on behalf* of the observed object – not for the purpose of despising it. This description is no impersonal, coldly objective itemization of scientifically culled details by which "the American" is calipered into submission to charts and measurements; it is more a riot of impressions and readings that prompt subjective responses to a type aureoled about by "undefined and mysterious boundaries." (That many among James's contemporaries did not catch the warmth of the author's interest will be demonstrated a little further on.)

James's preface to the 1907 New York Edition of *The American*