

JONATHAN FREEDMAN

## Introduction: The Moment of Henry James

Why, after a hundred years, Henry James? At a critical moment so leery of traditional notions of literary and cultural value, so impatient with gestures of authorial self-aggrandizement, so suspicious of the prerogatives of class privilege, few writers would seem *less* likely to survive than one thoroughly embedded in the highest of high literary culture, driven by desire for canonical status, fascinated by the intensities of the drawing room and the mores of the country house. And few bodies of work would seem less likely to thrive in our MTV-mediated age of instantaneous apprehension. The thickness, the opacity, the ambiguous range of reference of Jamesian prose demand attention, focus, and, that rarest of contemporary commodities, *time*.

Yet persist he has: indeed, his work has managed to attract devoted readers and inspiring commentaries across and through the major critical shifts of the last fifty years. Each successive wave of theoretical and critical practice – New Criticism, deconstruction, feminism, marxism, New Historicism – staked their claims and exemplified their style of interpretation by offering powerful re-readings of James. And as critical insistences of our own decade have shifted to emphases on postcoloniality, critical race studies, the study of sexual dissidence, James has retained a powerful hold on readers and critics alike. He has done so, moreover, not as a “case,” an object of critical scrutiny (if not condescension), he does so as a vital participant in these arenas. Indeed, if there is one surprise that the contributors to this volume (and its editor) persistently note, it is that this snobbish, if not mandarin, aesthete should have responded so intently to the seismic shifts of his own era, a time of enormous transformations in the domains of race, political economy, gender. In so doing, these critics further note with some astonishment, he seems to have registered rumblings we thought all our own.

The essays that follow have much to say about James’s relation to these matters, and more to boot. In this essay, I focus on three particular aspects of his work that touch with special power on the concerns of our own moment: the sometimes overlapping, indeed often mutually constitutive, arenas

JONATHAN FREEDMAN

of family, nation, and the literary. My point in doing so is to suggest that in these in particular, as in his work as a whole, James is a uniquely double figure, one richly situated in the cultural possibilities of his own moment but able to rework them in ways that seem profoundly prescient. My aim here, then, is partially to “place” James in the circumstances of his time, partially to suggest some of his saliences to our own. But my major goal is to reinvoke the reader to this most difficult and most rewarding of novelists. Many years of teaching James to both undergraduates and graduate students – not to mention the responses of dubious colleagues – reminds me of just how many obstacles James poses to contemporary readers. I hope this volume can help those readers recognize not only how astute but also how persistently challenging James can be – and that one of the things he challenges most fully is the complacency about our historical uniqueness that we bring to reading James.

### JAMES AND FAMILY

“We were inhabitants of a distinct country,” wrote Henry James’s brother, the pragmatist philosopher William, “the country of James.” Perhaps no greater uniqueness was possessed by Henry than the rich and idiosyncratic family into which he was born and in which he alternately chafed and thrived. And it was as much this family experience, I want to suggest, as his own affectional sensibilities that made James such a shrewd observer of the crosscurrents of intimacy, the work of relation. For Henry James was from the first pitched outside the newly dominant middle-class institution of the “family” – a position that allowed him to cast a skeptical eye on its effects in all the terrains it touched, both public and private.

To understand the full oddity of James’s upbringing, we might want to look briefly at one of the most influential descriptions of nineteenth-century American family life, that offered in Mary Ryan’s 1981 *Cradle of the Middle Class*. Through a richly sedimented account of upstate New York’s Oneida County, Ryan shows how the institution of the middle-class family grew out of the traditional, patriarchal family grounded in the rhythms of agricultural production. As the economy shifted from one based on domestic production – the household as a near-independent economic unit – to one based first on retail trade and then on industry, a new model of family life emerged. This model defined itself first in terms of a gendered division of labor, then in the doctrine of separate spheres: that system in which women were confined to the home but granted near-tyrannical powers over matters

## THE MOMENT OF HENRY JAMES

of family, culture, and reproduction while males were sent bustling into the world under the injunction to be self-made. Ryan's description of this process is not unique; but what makes it influential is her understanding of how changes in religious practice, economic organization, and ethnic composition helped create the middle-class model of the privatized family – and how in turn the private family shaped the mindset of a maturing middle class:

By midcentury, five years after the erection of Utica's [the industrial city at the center of Oneida County] first steam-powered factories . . . responsibility for maintaining purity, sobriety, and docility had been largely absorbed by the private family. . . . Homes [of the native-born middle class] had become shrines to temperate living, moral fortresses against the chaos of the streets, now inundated with a foreign population whose hallmarks from the middle class perspective were dirt and drink. . . . Sexual constraint, temperate habits, maternal socialization, and education, were productive of small families, conservative business policies, dogged work habits, and basic literacy skills – that is, the attributes required of small shops and stores and an increasing number of white-collar workers. . . . Thereafter the family itself became the cradle of middle class individuals. (238–9)

Now Ryan's Onieda County abutted directly on the county where Henry James's sternly Presbyterian grandfather, William James, Sr., made his fortune in real estate, capped by his acquisition of the property on which he helped build the city of Syracuse, a mere fifty miles west of Utica on the Erie Canal. And what is remarkable about this contiguity is that thereafter the James family of upstate New York comported itself to exactly *none* of the ideological lineaments that Ryan describes. Patriarchal the Jameses were to be sure: William's will effectively disinherited the novelist's father Henry James, Sr., on account of his lackadaisical approach to college and career; and although Henry Sr. effectively broke the will and assured himself of a solid \$10,000 per annum (a princely sum in the nineteenth century), he was hardly less willful in the management of his family than his own father had been. Yet in both his vociferously expressed opinions and in the management of his own clan, Henry James, Sr., positioned the Jameses in conspicuous opposition to the emergent norms of the middle-class family. He praised free love – perhaps, as he later claimed, without understanding the implications of his own argument. Such a defense, however, could not possibly have been offered for his bold denunciation of the piety of family feeling, which, he argued, is of little use except insofar as it anticipates a more perfect union of mankind with itself. Out-Emersoning the Emerson of *Self-Reliance*, Henry thundered:

JONATHAN FREEDMAN

I love my father and mother, my brother and sister, but I deny their unconditional property in me. . . . I will be the property of no person, and I will accept property in no person. I will be the son of my father, and the husband of my wife, and the parent of my child, but I will be all these things in a thoroughly divine way, or only as they involve no obloquy to my inward rightness, only as they impose no injustice on me towards others.

(Matthiessen, 55–6; hereafter cited as *JF*)

Nothing could stand as more of an affront to the evangelically driven, bourgeois family Ryan describes than this troping of the linchpin of the middle-class belief-system, the concept of private property. Nor, it might be added, could any course of child-rearing be conducted on principles less suited to producing proper middle-class citizens than the eccentric education by tutors and in a variety of private schools that the Jameses received, first in America then in Europe. Henry Jr. described his father's principles of "sensuous education" in the following terms: "What we were to do . . . was just to *be* something, something unconnected with specific doing." And to inculcate "being" rather than "doing" is to rear a Paterian aesthete, not a middle-class businessman (*JF*, 36).

The results of the James family experiment were various, to be sure. Recurrent bouts of depression to the point of breakdown afflicted all the Jameses from Henry Senior on down, as did varieties of alcoholism, self-balking or -defeating behavior, neurasthenia, business failure, and suicide. On the other hand, the system did nurture three geniuses, producing America's greatest philosopher, one of America's greatest novelists, and in Alice James a writer of such power that her diary has justifiably been placed next to the work of two of her brothers. For our purposes, however, the main point is that this experiment placed Henry James thoroughly outside of the dominant cultural institution of his own moment in all of its attitudinal, moral, and social dimensions at precisely the moment of its social institutionalization. The results are reflected in his writing. There are families galore in James's fiction, to be sure, but there are few if any representatives of the bunkered nuclear type that Ryan describes. Instead, we encounter families in every possible state of dissolution: orphaned girls wandering Europe, like Isabel Archer of *Portrait of a Lady* or Milly Theale of *Wings of the Dove*; motherless daughters writhing under the thumbs of their possessive fathers, like Catherine Sloper of *Washington Square*; neglected children given over to near-mad governesses, like Miles and Flora of *The Turn of the Screw*; neglected children used as a gruesome ploy in games of adultery and divorce, like Maisie Farange in *What Maisie Knew*. And when we do encounter at the

## THE MOMENT OF HENRY JAMES

apex of James's so-called Major Phase, a completed, successful family unit – that of Prince Amerigo, his wife Maggie, and their child the Principino in *The Golden Bowl* – it is a family like none other in fiction: cleansed from the twin threats of an incestuous closeness between a daughter and her own father and of an adulterous relation between her husband and his former lover only in the very last sentence of the very last paragraph of the very last page.

James's representations of “family,” in other words, pose a remarkable affront to dominant domestic ideals; it is as if his own experience unmoored him from the pieties of family relation, allowing him to regard it with eyes at once clear and skeptical. As such, he takes his place as one of our very best nineteenth- and early twentieth-century analysts of the twists and turns of those relations. The gusts of perverse emotion, the impulses toward possessiveness, the overtones of sexual compulsion that pervade the vicissitudes of courtship, the institution of marriage, the raising of children: these are as fully registered in James as in any other novelist of his era, if not more so. As is something else: the relation between intimacy and economy, the way that private relations, particularly those involving women and children, always involve the transmission of property. The words of his father – “I will be the property of no person” – ring ironically in the fates of Milly Theale and Isabel Archer, women who are transformed into just that, first by the social world in which they are embedded, then by the men they choose to fall in love with. And at the end of each of these texts, these characters, like all of James's greatest characters, take up Henry James Sr.'s words and give them (*mutatis mutandis*) a meaning all their own: “I will be the son of my father, and the husband of my wife, and the parent of my child, but I will be all these things in a thoroughly divine way.”

James, I am suggesting, was endowed by his own family and his particular education with the virtues as well as the burdens of a thoroughgoing marginality. Indeed, he possessed the ability to see to the core of arrangements naturalized by his culture, and to write fictions that enforce upon the reader the deep strangeness abiding in them. In his recognition of the essential oddity of the familial, James stands with equal oddity alongside those figures against which his reputation has historically been plotted, the nineteenth-century “domestic” or female novelists whose novels of family life combined a treacly rhetoric with a hard-eyed vision of domestic dysfunctionality. What Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth or Susan Warner expounded on the level of mass or popular culture, in other words, James articulated on that of high or elite culture – often in plots and language as ostentatiously “sentimental” as that of his female contemporaries. When the dying Ralph Touchett in *Portrait of*

JONATHAN FREEDMAN

*a Lady* turns to declare his love for Isabel, or the dying Milly Theale, as her last living act, endows Merton so that he may marry his lover, one is not above feeling a tug on the tearducts as powerful (and as manipulative) as that offered by any of the female contemporaries whom James and his fellow high-culture critics condescended to, reviled, or ignored.

Some critics – Alfred Habegger is chief among them – have taken this congruence as the sign that James invidiously appropriated the constructions of female culture, rewriting these plots with intentions and in idioms that enforced feminine weakness and ratified masculine power. Perhaps this is so; but it would take a longer argument than there is space for here to explore the full ramifications of James’s involvement with the mass market fictions of his era (for a beginning, see the third section of this essay). For now, I would point to only one of the many distinctive uses that James makes of the plot of family dissolution that was circulating so powerfully throughout the various cultural arenas of mid- to late-nineteenth-century culture, one that placed him at odds not only with the “literary domestics,” to use a somewhat unfortunate phrase of Mary Kelley’s, but also the high-culture *littérateurs* of his own moment, like George Eliot or Anthony Trollope, who turned to the same theme. To James, finally, the point of that plot is to enforce upon his reader the thoroughly subversive lesson (very close to his father’s) that relations contained in the family can be best understood as an adumbration of more fulfilled relations between people undertaken through the channeling of desire in all its manifestations: social, sexual, acquisitive, emulative. In other words, James’s persistent use of the family plot, even or especially at his most sentimental, directs us to the recognition that human beings must not only reckon with the relations that construct them, but also work to build new, more efficacious ones. And it is in these new relations, formed out of the contingencies of social encounter – Millie’s endowment of Densher and Kate, and Merton’s subsequent moral transformation; Isabel’s decision to return to her marriage to rescue her step-daughter; even Maggie’s decision to reconstruct her marriage and the Prince’s decision to follow her will – that bonds between people are given value and meaning as if for the first time. The contingency of human relations concealed by the bourgeois family and enforced in its frequently cruel patterns of courtship and child-rearing thus become for James the grounds of their reconstruction. As horrifyingly tragic as the entanglements of human intimacy often turn out to be, it is their very fragility that allows for their remaking. And that remaking, for James, is the utopian point of the exercise – one that projects the making of social value through and well beyond the nineteenth-century nu-



## THE MOMENT OF HENRY JAMES

clear family in all its splendid dysfunctionality, and hence foreshadows new possibilities of relation whose lineaments we are only now beginning to discover.

## JAMES AND NATION

The position that James's upbringing allowed him to assume vis-à-vis family, education, and reproduction also placed him outside of another dominant social form of the later years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century: that of the nation. Or, to be more accurate, James the American expatriate was uniquely positioned both inside and outside this configuration at the moment of its full consolidation; and here too his distinctive position allowed him to perceive possibilities whose importance has become clearer only over the rest of the century.

To James the question of national identity was both crucial and ramified. His fictions play a remarkable number of changes on a plot critics once referred to as "the International Theme," in which naive Americans encounter a Europe that seemed both endowed with cultural wonders and suffused with a sinister, often sexual, knowledge of the world. At times, this encounter is tragic. Daisy Miller wanders into the Roman Forum, an area well known to be miasmal, and dies of consumption; Isabel Archer wanders into an English country-house and ends up, after a number of plot turns, making a disastrous marriage with a pestiferous aesthete. At others, it is comic: Lambert Strether, sent to Europe by his patron to retrieve her son from a dangerous liaison, ends up misconstruing every single relation he so encounters and returns to America with his mission undone and his own affections thoroughly called into question. At yet other times, the encounter is melodramatic, even hokey: in *The American* the resonantly named Christopher Newman falls in love with a European and ends up enmeshed in a plot involving mysterious family secrets, fatal duels, and a lover locked away in a prisonlike convent. Sometimes it is so laden with thematic richness as to bear the weight of world-historical import: in *The Golden Bowl* when the millionaire Adam Verver carries the cultural riches of Europe to a palace of art in American City, America (James is painting with a very broad brush late in his career), the novel is clear to note that this act of appreciative appropriation places him, and the booming American capital he represents, in the position of the imperial projects that preceded him – those of Greece, Rome, and England. The translation of empire, in other words, is one with the transmission of culture: the matter of Americans in Europe is not simply a case of the inno-

JONATHAN FREEDMAN

cents abroad, but also one of the remaking of cultural power at the moment of modernity.

The “International Theme” might, therefore, better be known as the national theme – or what happens to an identity conceived of as national at the moment when capital, communications, and culture began to circulate more freely across boundaries both geographical and imaginative. To be sure, whatever his own willed expatriation – James left America in 1874, returned only briefly thereafter, and ended his life as a British subject – there are relatively few non-Americans in his fictions, and fewer as finely imagined and fully wrought as his dazed and confused Americans searching for a purchase on their own identity in a foreign clime. But if what he called “the complex fate” of being American is at the center of James’s concern with the national question, this fate is not interrogated in isolation. What remains at stake throughout is the *relationality* of national feeling at the moment of international intermingling. It is only when they travel to Europe, after all, that James’s Americans are able to define their own national identity. And James’s Englishmen and Europeans are by that very same process forced to recognize their own transmutation: their transformation into objects of exotic touristical interest (such is the fate of the Englishmen that Isabel Archer’s friend Henrietta Stackpole encounters – even, James broadly hints, of the one she marries); into stereotypes (the lascivious Roman Giovanelli of *Daisy Miller* is as much a stock character as the innocent American girl who encounters him); into commodities (this is the fate of Prince Amerigo, whose bemusement at his own acquisition by an American millionaire we watch with a sense of horrified detachment all our own). At the moment when identities start to circulate across and through national borders and boundaries, when financial and cultural capital are being exported wholesale from an attenuating British empire or a vitiated Europe to a new kind of world power, what it is to be “English” or “Italian” or “French” is as much up for grabs as it what it is to be “American.”

James understands, then, that national identity is an increasingly powerful force in the world at precisely the moment of, and through precisely the logic of, the increasing ease of international exchange; and that, in such a context, the idea of the nation could do powerfully complex work. After all, in James’s lifetime, the force of nationalism wielded together a welter of independent monarchies under the guise of a common language and culture, as was the case with James’s beloved Italy or his far-from-beloved Germany. He hoped that both language and culture might do the same for the United States itself, which had in his youth been rent asunder in the Civil War and



## THE MOMENT OF HENRY JAMES

was struggling in his middle years to reconstruct itself on a new, imperial model. But this resurgence of national feeling, as James also sees with extraordinary clarity, was itself called into question by migrations of culture and language across national boundaries under the impact of such forces as technological change, like the steamships that carried James across the Atlantic; the diasporas of population registered by the Jews and Italians and Irishmen who James increasingly sees in the teeming slums of England or America; the rise of a mass culture that was to create wholesale histories, identities, vivid “senses of the past” – or, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, “invented traditions.”

To devote myself fully to all of these three (and the other myriad factors in “becoming national” that James anatomizes) would take a volume in itself. Let me advert only to one, James’s description of the invention of national tradition in his 1904 memoir of a visit to the United States, *The American Scene*:

No long time is required, in the States, to make vivid for the visitor the truth that the nation is almost feverishly engaged in producing, with the greatest possible activity and expedition, an “intellectual” pabulum after its own heart, and that not only the arts and the ingenuities of the draftsman . . . pay their extravagant tribute, but those of the journalist, the novelist, the dramatist, the genealogist, the historian, are pressed for dear life into the service. The illustrators of the magazines improvise, largely – that is when not labouring in the cause of the rural dialects – improvise a field of action, full of features at any price . . . ; the novelists improvise, with the aid of historians, a romantic local past of costume and compliment and sword play and gallantry and passion; the dramatists build up, of a thousand pieces, the airy fiction that the life of the people in the world among whom the elements of clash and contrast are simplest and most superficial abounds in the subjects and situations and effects of the theater; while the genealogists touch up the picture with their pleasant hint of the number, over the land, of families of royal blood. All this constitutes a vast home-grown provision for entertainment, rapidly superseding any that may be borrowed or imported, and that indeed already begins, not invisibly, to press for exportation. . . . It is the public these appearances refer us to that becomes thus again the more attaching subject; the public so placidly uncritical that the whitest thread of the deceptive switch never makes it blink, and sentimental at once with such inveteracy and such simplicity that, finding everything everywhere perfectly splendid, it fairly goes down on its knees to be humbuggingly humbugged. It proves ever, by the ironic measure, quite incalculably young. (AS, 458–9)

This selection is a remarkable performance indeed; not only does it give a flavor of the baroque prose style that was to mark the later Henry James –

JONATHAN FREEDMAN

to the chagrin of William, contemporary audiences, and most readers of our day – but it also suggests his remarkable understanding of the reciprocal role played by the institutions of mass culture and the “public” they address in the creation of national identity. What James is writing about here is the way that a romantic past for the American South got invented in a frankly Hobsbawmian way, the way that narratives of “local color” work to generate a sense of the hoary historical past of that region for the consumption of a national audience. Or, to be more precise, he is noting the way that that national audience is created by the very act of consuming fictions of exoticized regionalism. James’s argument turns on the many uses of the word “subject” in that remarkably vague phrase, “the more attaching subject”: it refers at once to the rapturous audience; the subject matter they perceive; and the varied members of a national collective – a national subject created by witnessing these fictions of home-grown exoticism – organized here not by the rituals of state power but rather by their own desire for bewitchment-by-entertainment (the desire to be “humbuggingly humbugged”). But James’s analysis does not stop here. He goes on to suggest that these texts form the materials of not only an American romance but a cultural commodity vendable on the world stage, a national narrative “that begins, not invisibly, to press for exportation” onto a world market, there to compete on equal terms with narratives that have previously been imported to make the American one. “Quite incalculably young” as the American national subject may be, it becomes the very type of what we might want to call modernity (or even postmodernity). Transnational, even global, its various varieties are created willy-nilly out of organic, native traditions via a booming mass culture and create in their turn a collective, mass identity through the consumption of precisely these fictions of exoticism.

There is much in this passage to remind us of the work of contemporary critics like Homi Bhabha and Frederic Jameson – not least the deliberate use of an abstruse vocabulary in cultural analysis: James, like these critics, seeks to oppose the political work of mass culture in its most banalizing sense by writing a prose that cannot be consumed easily or digested at will. (And he is like Jameson, in particular, in another way: just as Jameson declared the Hotel Bonaventure in Los Angeles the very prototype of postmodernity, so too James described the hermetic environments of “the hotel world” as the very cynosure of the American leisure class of the Gilded Age). Needless to say, the comparison reminds us that James did not display attitudes we might call progressive as he faced these new possibilities. Indeed, he possessed more than the usual prejudices of his class and moment, in distinct