PART ONE

Life and career, times and places

CHAPTER 1

Nineteenth-century America (1843–1870)

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On a summer's day in 1850, travelling with his father, the religious philosopher and social reformer Henry James Senior, on the ferry from Manhattan to the family's summer home on Long Island, the 7-year-old Henry James was introduced to Washington Irving. Irving had important news to convey, namely the recent drowning of Margaret Fuller in a shipwreck off nearby Fire Island. As he writes in his 1913 volume of autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others*, 'This unfortunate lady was essentially of the Boston connection; but she must have been, and probably through Emerson, a friend of my parents . . . [T]he more I squeeze the sponge of memory the more its stored accretions flow' (*A*, 37). Recollection of this encounter with Irving does indeed provoke a further memory, this time of the young James viewing 'a small full-length portrait of Miss Fuller, seated as now appears to me and wrapped in a long white shawl, the failure of which to do justice to its original my companions denounced with some emphasis' (37). The intersection of Irving, Fuller and James on the New York ferry neatly orchestrates a tableau of American literary history. Irving, generally regarded as America's first professional man of letters, had consistently concerned himself with exploring the nation's complex relationship of attraction and resistance to Europe; Margaret Fuller, friend and one-time Transcendentalist colleague of Ralph Waldo Emerson, had been returning from Europe after a period during which her accounts in the New York *Tribune* newspaper of the failed Italian revolution of 1848–9 had argued strongly for America's more cosmopolitan engagement with European culture and politics; James, of course, was to propose and practise a model of authorship that avoided the narrowness of provincialism and nationalism, one that was concerned, instead, to map the transatlantic as both a narrative framework and an epistemological challenge. The three generations of American writing represented by this recalled scene also map on to an historical arc that moves from Irving's post-Revolutionary moment, to the antebellum culture of Fuller's New England romanticism, and will end with James's self-positioning as the figure best equipped to

describe the conditions of post-civil war American identity. The sense of failed representation that James remembered as the general response to the Fuller portrait chimes with his own anxieties over the attenuated status of authorship within the American republic of letters at mid century. The sense of a culture not being able to 'do justice' to its intellectual figures – and of those figures struggling to represent an insubstantial culture – would come to preoccupy his reading of antebellum America. Through an account of his early years, this chapter examines James's entanglement with his national inheritance – and of the status of American culture and society in his work – in the years leading up to his emergence as a novelist and the publication of *Watch and Ward* in 1871.

Henry James was born on 15 April 1843, in New York, a city that would inspire, challenge and confront him for the rest of his life, and in honour of which he would name his 'New York' edition of works (1907–9). He was the second child of James Senior and Mary Walsh James; a year older was William James (1842–1911), the future psychologist and philosopher. James's younger siblings were Garth Wilkinson ('Wilky') James (1845–83), Robertson ('Bob') James (1846–1910) and Alice James (1848–92). James Senior was the recipient of a $10,000 annual inheritance, which removed the necessity of having to work, allowing him the freedom to pursue his intellectual interests and to construct a peripatetic transatlantic lifestyle for his family. James Senior's philosophy was eclectic, to say the least, but had been given impetus by his embrace in 1844 of Swedenborgianism, a system of thought that he turned to after suffering in England what he called a 'vastation' experience – a mental breakdown that, in its retelling, became imbued with the force of a conversion narrative. James would later recall the 'vast, even though incomplete, array of Swedenborg's works ... forming even for short journeys the base of our father's travelling library and perhaps at some seasons therewith the accepted strain on our mother's patience' (*A*, 332). In *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) he could balance respect and incomprehension in describing James Senior's thought as 'extraordinarily complex and worked out and original, intensely personal as an exposition' (*A*, 335). James, who, as he acknowledges, exhibited a 'total otherness of contemplation' (335), nevertheless recognized his father's 'quality of intellectual passion, the force of cogitation and aspiration' (336). In a post-Jacksonian America of burgeoning capitalism and increased urbanization, James Senior's dilettantish embrace of intellectual life sat uneasily in a world 'in which people sat close and made money', as Henry James defined business in his childhood. The family, he attests, was ignorant of all matters pertaining to conventional careers and vocations ('our consciousness was positively disfurnished, as

that of young Americans went, of the actualities of "business" in a world of business' [*A*, 35]), for one of the central tenets of his father's philosophy was the willed abjuration of success as generally understood, where conventional notions of value became 'a reward for effort for which I remember to have heard no good word, nor any sort of word, ever faintly breathed' (*A*, 123). Within a capitalist culture of acquisitiveness and expansion, the paternal injunction to dissent from its shibboleths and ambitions was met with understandable ambiguity, especially by William. Yet James Senior's fear of intellectual 'narrowing', of restricting the free play of one's consciousness by a commitment to a particular form of activity which then 'dispensed with any suggestion of an alternative' (*A*, 268), might be said to inaugurate the characteristic Jamesian stance of the incessantly curious observer, the practitioner of 'the visiting mind' (*A*, 16). In a famous passage remembering his childhood self on New York's Eighteenth Street, James reads back into the scene the beginnings of his authorial persona, one which mandated an openness to experience at odds with the imperatives of vocation and capital: it was enough, he writes, 'just to *be* somewhere – almost anywhere would do – and somehow receive an impression or an accession, feel a relation or a vibration' (*A*, 17).

In October 1843 the Jameses departed for England, before journeying on to France, in what was to be the first of Henry James's many crossings of the Atlantic. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a newly acquired family friend and a less willing traveller altogether, wrote to James Senior: 'I hate to see good men go out of the country which they keep sweet . . . It is a great disappointment to lose you'.[1] Emerson's intellectual project to assert America's cultural independence against what he had already characterized – in his 1837 address 'The American Scholar' – as the nation's unnecessary deference to the 'courtly muses of Europe',[2] is echoed in this lament at the James family's departure. The advocacy of national assertion that lay behind Emerson's words, always couched in the terms of self-culture and individual growth he had inherited from Unitarianism, became more aggressively promulgated as a political programme by the 'Young America' movement of the 1840s. For James Senior, however, intellectual and spiritual growth would remain unbound by such national determinations, and over the next seventeen years he would take his family back and forth across the Atlantic three times (1843–5, 1855–8 and 1859–60) in search of a cosmopolitan education for his children and a more sustaining culture for himself.

Such ambivalence about the ability of American society to nurture and support its keenest minds is evident in Henry James's reflections on the antebellum New England of his childhood, and on the key figures of

Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne in particular. Two lengthy essays – one a review of two volumes of Emerson's correspondence with Thomas Carlyle (1883) and the other a review of a memoir of Emerson by James Eliot Cabot (1887) – present the reader with a cultural milieu of charming but ultimately naive simplicity, a world James judges to be so distant as to appear almost unrecognizable. 'The questions of those years are not the questions of these' (*LC-1*, 233), he declares, casting a retrospective eye over the culture of his father's generation, as if for anthropological inspection. Reading through Emerson's letters to Carlyle, James notes their ability to convey 'the thinness of the New England atmosphere in those days – the thinness, and, it must be added, the purity' (*LC-1*, 244). Such a 'simple social economy', he claims, throws the emphasis back on to the self to compensate for the sparse particulars of American life: 'It must be remembered, of course, that the importance of the individual was Emerson's great doctrine; every one had a kingdom within himself – was potential sovereign, by divine right, over a multitude of inspirations and virtues' (245). For James, the America represented by New England romanticism ran the risk of seeming hopelessly homogenous. The introspection that results is not a celebration of the imperial self, but instead a recourse to inwardness of the kind identified by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*, where 'each citizen' is 'habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object: namely himself'.[3] The Emersonian figure of cultural self-sufficiency may assert the plenitude of a virgin American scene, but James views such a stance as solipsistic and deleterious for the creation of serious art. In an early (1865), and harsh, review of Walt Whitman's collection of civil war poetry *Drum-Taps*, he links Whitman's poetic failure to a personal disposition that runs close to egotism. 'To be positive', he writes, 'one must have something to say; to be positive requires reason, labor, and art; and art requires, above all things, a suppression of one's self, a subordination of one's self to an idea' (*LC-1*, 633). At the age of 22, James is beginning to work out a theory of art, of literary form, that already suggests the incompatibility of that theory to a culture which exhorts self-expression as an aesthetic principle. In his review of Cabot's memoir, James draws an explicitly transatlantic contrast between an American milieu 'not fertile in variations' and the 'more complicated world' of Europe as experienced by Emerson on his travels. Yet we learn that 'his spirit, his moral taste, as it were, abode always within the undecorated walls of his youth' (*LC-1*, 254), where the phrase 'as it were' works both to clarify and to diminish an idea of its subject's 'taste'.

James's most sustained example of this kind of literary-historical analysis of antebellum America is his book-length account of the life and times of

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1879). Unlike the readings of Emerson and Whitman mentioned above, *Hawthorne* is as much an account of James's own relationship to his nation – and to its literary potential – as it is a reading of his literary predecessor. The distance provided by chronology and geography (James wrote the book while in England) enables him implicitly to contrast the conditions of authorship that pertained in Hawthorne's time with the more cosmopolitan and complex possibilities that he, James, enjoys. There is an element of prevarication in his account of Hawthorne's career – Hawthorne's writing is sometimes a product of his historical background ('the most beautiful and most eminent representative of a literature' [*LC-1*, 319]), sometimes a product of his genius (despite the 'immitigable granite' of New England 'he sprouted and bloomed' [320]), and sometimes a product of the friction between those two possibilities. James wishes to account for what he regards as his subject's literary failings – primarily a preference for allegory and romance over Jamesian realism – as indicative of an American environment that – even in 1879 – seems 'rather crude and immature' (327). Yet at the same time he is prepared to admit a sense of wonder that, given such unpropitious circumstances, Hawthorne was able to sustain a career at all. 'It strikes the observer today', he writes, 'that Hawthorne showed great courage in entering a field in which the honours and emoluments were so scanty as the profits of authorship must have been at that time' (343). The famous list of cultural and social features, those 'items of high civilization' which James asserts 'are absent from the texture of American life' ('No State, in the European sense of the word . . . No sovereign, no court, no clergy, no army no manors' and ending with 'no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class – no Epsom nor Ascot!' [351–2]), present a taxonomy of an American expatriate's dissatisfaction with the social, institutional and cultural resources of his homeland. The present tense of the passage – these things '*are* absent' – clearly suggests that James regards this as an ongoing situation; the narrowness of a pre-civil war culture seems to have persisted into the 1870s. Yet at the same time as he offers this litany of negation, the sheer exaggerated excess of his list, its obviously contentious elements (can James *really* believe there is no 'political society' in the United States?), and the overstated exclamatory flourish of its conclusion, all work to unsettle a straightforward reading of this piece of cultural criticism. James is both noting America's absences and gently mocking some of those European claims for superiority.

The central distinction James chooses to draw between his present moment and the America of his father's generation is the Civil War. It

'marks an era in the history of the American mind', he declares, that is transformative, introducing 'into the national consciousness a certain sense of proportion and relation, of the world being a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed' (*LC-1*, 427, 428). 'Relation' is a key James term, and it suggests here that postbellum Americans have, after the trauma of conflict, acquired the idea of connection, an awareness of intersubjectivity that makes the writing of narrative possible. James's historical division shapes a periodization of American history that follows a trajectory of increased complexity while at the same time authorizing his own position among the advance guard of the developing republic of letters. But if retrospectively the Civil War is imagined as a clear national watershed, at the time the issue of abolition and the status of the Union were more problematic issues for the James family. James Senior's attitude to slavery was characteristically inconsistent, in ways that would reveal themselves in the roles he allowed his four sons to play in the conflict. He thought African Americans inferior to whites because, as he phrased it, their 'sensuous imagination predominates'.[4] Yet in a public speech delivered on 4 July 1861, James Senior is clear about the terms upon which he is prepared to support the war. In high-flown rhetoric, he asserts that slavery is a 'poison ... grown so rank and pervasive' that its 'foul and fetid miasm' masquerades 'as the fragrant breath of assured health'.[5] The world of *realpolitik*, in which maintaining the Union at the expense of an outright moral condemnation of slavery was felt to be the most appropriate response, was roundly targeted: 'The Republic is much, but it is not all. It is much as a means, but nothing as an end. It is much as a means to human advancement, but nothing as its consummation'.[6] Yet such an idealistic stance was often overshadowed by more contentious statements. For example, in the summer of 1863, at the height of the conflict and following Abraham Lincoln's New Year Emancipation Proclamation, James Senior could fault mainstream abolitionism for regarding slavery as 'primarily a wrong done the slave rather than one done the master'.[7] As Henry James ruefully noted over forty years later, reflecting on the discomfort felt by his father, and others like him, 'It is thus impossible, in looking back on the "quiet" people of that time, not to see them as rather pitifully ground between the two millstones of the crudity of the "peculiar institution" on the one side and the crudity of impatient agitation against it on the other'.[8] That James himself could be critical of 'impatient agitation' is apparent in his response to the radical abolitionist John Brown, whose failed attempt at an armed rebellion at Harper's Ferry in 1859 had been supported financially by several New England worthies. In his Hawthorne biography, James quotes a letter by his subject describing his

sense of 'intellectual satisfaction in seeing him [Brown] hanged'. James is happy to concur, judging that this 'is a capital expression of the saner estimate, in the United States, of the dauntless and deluded old man who proposed to solve a complex political problem by stirring up a servile insurrection' (*LC-1*, 452).

James was not only exposed to the intricacies of antebellum politics by his father. New York's popular culture of the period also contributed to his political education, for he recalls a childhood trip in November 1853 to P. T. Barnum's Great American Museum to see a stage production of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which the character of Eliza 'intrepidly and gracefully' made her way across the icebergs of the Ohio River. James had read Stowe's novel on its publication the previous year – it was his 'first experiment in grown-up fiction' and, by his own admission, he 'lived and moved' within its pages (*A*, 92) – and during 'the season of [the book's] freshness' the issues it highlighted came even closer to home with the arrival of the Norcom family as neighbours. Their 'great Kentucky error' was to bring with them 'two pieces of precious property' – their slaves, Davy and Aunt Sylvia – who, one night, effected their escape and 'fled . . . from bondage' (*A*, 142). In his autobiography, James would look back on the antebellum society of New York with disdain. It was, he wrote, a mixture of 'the busy, the tipsy, and Daniel Webster' (*A*, 30), the Senator for Massachusetts whose support of the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act earned him scorn from abolitionists and liberal intellectuals, but whose presence 'filled the sky of public life from pole to pole, even to a childish consciousness not formed in New England and for which that strenuous section was but a name in the geography book' (*A*, 30–1). If politics was 'otherwise a blank' (*A*, 31) for James in New York, the years 1861–9, when the family was based in New England (in Newport, Boston and Cambridge), placed him more centrally within the region's more explicitly reformist and abolitionist atmosphere. He attended a large meeting at the Boston Music Hall on 1 January 1863, to celebrate the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, listening to Emerson read his anti-slavery poem 'Boston Hymn' and admiring the 'immense effect' of his 'beautiful voice' (*LC-1*, 267). Two years previously, in 1861, and six months after the outbreak of the war, James suffered what he would later call his 'obscure hurt', a back injury received while fighting a stable fire in Newport when serving as a volunteer fireman. The retelling of this episode, in James's late volume of autobiography, is shrouded in indirectness and imprecision, but what is emphasized is the link he wishes to make between his own ailment and the national upheaval. His father was adamant that both Henry and William – his more sensitive and conspicuously intellectual sons – would

not enlist. William began his studies at Harvard in September 1861, and in September 1863 Henry was exempted from the draft because of physical disability, having already enrolled at Harvard Law School. In *Notes of a Son and Brother* this period is recalled as 'a passage of personal history the most entirely personal, but between which, as a private catastrophe or difficulty, bristling with embarrassments, and the great public convulsion that announced itself in bigger terms each day, I felt from the very first an association of the closest, yet withal, I feel, almost of the least clearly expressible' (*A*, 414). The elderly autobiographer, reflecting on this formative period in America's history and his response to it, forges an affinity of shared trauma that enables his younger self, an aspiring artist in a time of conflict, to enact the possibility of participation. James Senior had fewer qualms about his two younger sons joining the ranks, and Wilky and Bob, neither 'cut out for intellectual labours', as their father put it in a letter to a family friend, served with distinction.[9]

As the United States was undergoing its public upheaval, James's career as a published author took flight, with his work appearing in the pages of periodicals based in Boston and New York. Aside from the well-established – and establishment – *North American Review* (founded in 1815), the country's major publishing houses began to found and support a new kind of journal at mid-century. Three of the most influential of these, the *Atlantic Monthly* (founded in 1857), *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (1850) and *Scribner's Monthly* (1870), were targeted at a middle-class readership keen to develop its cultural capital by engaging with quality writing across a range of subjects. The appeal of this type of publication for James is easy to understand – indeed, he published in all three of the titles listed above. Despite his lament in *Hawthorne* at America's continuing absences, these periodicals promised a literary culture that, in their increased secularity, cosmopolitanism and aesthetic range, introduced a more diverse and complex set of reading possibilities and pleasures. However James's first published story, 'A Tragedy of Error', appeared anonymously in the February 1864 number of the less well-known *Continental Monthly*. This first tale, set in a French seaport and melodramatically describing an adulterous marriage, was a self-conscious expression of its author's cosmopolitan credentials, demonstrating traces of his reading of Prosper Mérimée. Soon, though, James was writing stories with American locales, and a number of them ('The Story of a Year' [1865], 'Poor Richard' [1867] and 'A Most Extraordinary Case' [1868]) were concerned with the Civil War and its aftermath, and especially with the status and value of injured or ill men unable to participate in the conventional masculine rites.

Alongside James's emergence as a writer of fiction, he was regularly employed to pen reviews, beginning with a notice in the October 1864 issue of the *North American Review* of *Essays on Fiction* by Nassau Senior. This piece constitutes his first attempt to articulate a theory of narrative, and in his assertion that fiction should aim to represent 'triumphs of fact' (*LC-1*, 1204), James emphasizes his sympathy with the project of European realism as he had encountered it in his reading of Balzac and George Eliot. His early assessments of American fiction, by contrast, tended to associate its limited aesthetic quality with the nation's provincial inability to sustain a society of material, tangible substance. For example, James judges that Louisa May Alcott's novel *Moods* (1865) demonstrates its author's 'ignorance of human nature', the result of which is 'that her play is not a real play, nor her actors real actors' (*LC-1*, 194). Likewise, the immensely popular Harriet Prescott Spofford is criticized for fictional 'pictures [that] are invariably incoherent and meaningless' (*LC-1*, 604). Yet James's assessment of cultural provincialism as a distinctly *American* phenomenon is only one position that his writing explores during this period, for in an 1866 review of the nineteenth-century diarist Eugénie de Guérin he contrasts French provinciality ('the social vacuity of [de Guérin's] life' [*LC-2*, 435]) with a very different conception of American – and specifically New England – identity. While James acknowledges the 'moral rectitude' (434) of his American scene, he goes on to complicate any straightforward analogy that might be drawn between this form of high-minded morality and a state of intellectual simplicity:

> To a certain extent, virtue and piety seem to be nourished by vice and scepticism. A very good man or a very good woman in New England is an extremely complex being. They are as innocent as you please, but they are anything but ignorant. They travel; they hold political opinions; they are accomplished Abolitionists; they read magazines and newspapers, and write for them; . . . in a word, they are enlightened. The result of this freedom of enquiry is that they become self-conscious. They obtain a notion of the relation of their virtues to a thousand objects . . . [T]hey present a myriad of reflected lights and shadows. (434–5)

The reference to 'relation' anticipates his use of the word in *Hawthorne* and suggests a society that is more varied and interconnected than we might expect from James's assessment of American culture in that book. Against the roll-call of negatives that characterize his later version of the United States, this assessment of New England, written in the year after the end of the Civil War but still reflecting the nation's antebellum character, acknowledges the presence of a political and literary culture at work. The