RSA Journal 28/2017

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Commemorating the Lost City: New York in Henry James's *A Small Boy and Others*

The "peerless conjuror": this is how Henry James, in *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), describes the magician Antoni van Zandt, who performed to great acclaim in nineteenth-century New York under the stage name of Signor Blitz (100).[1] "Peerless conjuror" is also an appellation James might have justifiably claimed for himself, given his prodigious display of memory (for names, incidents, places, objects) in what came to be the first of his three autobiographical volumes. As we know from the testimony of his typist Theodora Bosanquet, it was "extraordinarily easy" for the elderly James "to recover the past" (38). In the room in Chelsea where they worked together, he produced memory after memory of his childhood as if out of a hat. A worthy successor to Signor Blitz, James performed a particularly sensational trick when, much to the chagrin of his sister-in-law Alice and her son Henry (Harry), he substituted himself for his late brother William whom they had expected from the beginning to be at the center of Henry's recollections.[2] Henry thus became the "small boy" of the title, pushing William to the margins of the stage, where he was left until the second volume, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914).

Over the years, James's memoirs have been variously described as a form of therapy (Edel 459; Sayre 144-45), his "final Preface" (Hoffa 278), a "great story … about American life and culture" (Eakin 125), and an American counterpart to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (Tintner 252). This last comparison may send readers of *A Small Boy and Others* in search of an equivalent to the celebrated *madeleine* episode, and although this quest is not likely to yield satisfying results, James's readers will be confronted with overwhelming evidence of the intimate connection between memory and food (more specifically, sweets). Indeed, so pervasive in the text is the presence of food items (ice cream, peaches, baked apples, custards, etc.),

so palpable is James's pleasure in conjuring up their delectable appearance and flavor, that *A Small Boy and Others* could irreverently be called "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Glutton." In James's recreation of his childhood experience, taste ranks second only to sight. To some extent, the two sensory perceptions overlap, as strongly suggested by James's characterization of his younger self as typically engaged in the act of "gaping." The boy James certainly looks at the world in wonder, but he is also voraciously eager to take in as much as possible. As Scott Derrick has argued, the "open mouth" might very well be the "proper metaphor for the consciousness of the young James" (30) who stuffs himself both with impressions and a remarkable quantity of food, and also stuffs his language, as it were, with food metaphors. "Youth itself," to use Jennifer Fleissner's words, is remembered by James as a "careless rapture of gorging" (40).

The large extent to which New York in the 1850s could satisfy young James's appetite (both literally and figuratively) is fully revealed in the episode of his visit to photographer Mathew Brady's Broadway establishment. On that fateful day in 1854, James beheld a scene – simultaneously a messy metropolis in the making, a bountiful Eden, a fruit-laden Arcadia, and a piece of fertile South in the industrialized North – as a "vast succulent cornucopia" of stimuli (*Small* 60-61). When James arrives by boat from Staten Island and his gaze meets with endless groceries overflowing with wares, with "carts and barrows and boxes and baskets, sprawling or stacked" with edibles, he could be a pilgrim newly arrived in the dreamed-of Land of Plenty. Even the squalor which, for James, is inseparable from commerce, is "wonderfully mixed and seasoned" (*Small* 60) and thus ready for visual consumption. The way in which James proceeds by accumulation, piling up words to make us visualize piled up goods and then launches into a memorable ode to peaches, recalls a nursery rhyme and a child's tall tale:

> bushels of peaches … peaches big and peaches small, peaches white and peaches yellow … they were 'cut up' and eaten with cream at every meal; domestically 'brandied' they figured, the rest of the year, scarce less freely … and when ice-cream was added, or they were added *to* it, they formed the highest revel we knew. Above all the public heaps of them, the high-piled receptacles at every turn, touched the street as with a sort of southern plenty. (*Small* 61)

But those peaches, like the "Isabella grapes and Seckel pears" he saw displayed in such abundance on wooden stalls, appear all the more delicious in retrospect because their evocation is filtered through a sense of loss. They are part and parcel of a "more bucolic age of the American world" that in the early twentieth century seemed already the stuff of legend (*Small* 60-61).

Yet, for James, to introduce his readers to what at the outset of the book he calls "the circle of [his] commemoration" (*Small* 5) was surprisingly empowering. The desire and conviction that guided him were not dissimilar from those that had recently allowed him to bring to completion the enormous undertaking of revising and prefacing the twenty-four volume New York edition of his works (1907-09). Once again, he was responding to a crisis with unsuspected energy. The monumental New York edition had been a resounding statement against the impermanence of American life he had experienced during his 1904-05 sojourn in his native country. Through the act of writing his memoir, James rose up against his disappointment at the meager sales of the New York edition, as well as the bad health and acute depression he had suffered through 1909 and 1910 – a condition vastly aggravated by the loss in short succession of his brothers Robertson (Bob) and William (1910). Paradoxically, travelling the long distance that separated him from his younger self – revisiting, re-examining, and re-evaluating his past – rejuvenated him. Once more, he derived sustenance from a renewed awareness of his creative powers[3], and he found a sense of comfort in the very process of revision. As Sergio Perosa has noted, *A Small Boy and Others* "restores James's ability as a writer: the text that went to form his Autobiography can indeed be seen as his last literary masterpiece, in a period when he faced almost a writer's block in dealing with his fictional material, as for instance in *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past,* two novels which were left unfinished" (12).

James went back to a time when the development of his own consciousness, curiosity, and taste coincided with the burgeoning of national culture. He recalled the painters, sculptors, and writers who had put American creativity on the map as presences that haunted his family's "friendly fireside" or, in some cases, possibly hovered "in an outer circle" (*Small* 50-51). Like quasi-supernatural entities, those presences stimulated

both his perception and sense of wonder. Generously intent on doing justice to all the impressions and influences that had shaped him as a child, he even made public his altered opinion of two American writers, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman – both of whom he had previously dismissed with words bordering on contempt.[4] It seems particularly fitting that in a book populated with many figures from the distant past, James should pay tribute to Poe, the undisputed master of resurrection. By discounting "the legend of the native neglect of him," James effectively reclaims Poe as a national treasure as well as something of a family heirloom: "Was he not even at that time on all lips, had not my brother, promptly master of the subject, beckoned on my lagging mind with a recital of The Gold-Bug and The Pit and the Pendulum? – both of which, however, I was soon enough to read for myself, adding to them The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (*Small* 51).[5] He goes even further with Whitman, the "happy genius" (*Small* 66), whom he seems to rediscover as a – very unlikely – kindred spirit.[6] This is particularly evident, I believe, in the way James portrays New York, emphasizing his boyish exposure to the countless scenes and experiences the city could offer. Not only does James recapture, like Whitman, "the avidity and insatiable curiosity of a child," to use Ross Posnock's words (171), but he becomes, on the page, a close relation to a Whitman child, such as the sponge-like observer in Whitman's poem "There Was a Child Went Forth."

The large New York section of *A Small Boy* also shows how James's acts of revisiting and revising involve a form of dialogue with his own literary production. As more than one critic has noted, the yardstick by which old New York is to be measured, appreciated, and commemorated is the "unspeakable" twentieth-century metropolis (*Henry James: Letters* 4: 338, 350) James depicted in *The American Scene* (1907) and in such New York stories as "The Jolly Corner" (1908), "Crapy Cornelia" (1909), and "A Round of Visits" (1910). But James also casts his glance further back in his career. For example, the tremendous profusion of materials James parades before his readers in *A Small Boy* may be said to belie the long list of missing items (places, institutions, traditions) in American life he had notoriously included in his 1879 book *Hawthorne*. And his affectionate remembrance of Washington Square – where his maternal grandmother had lived – reprises

the surprisingly autobiographical digression in the novel that bears the same name. Linked by a reference to a long gone, ill-smelling Ailanthus tree that James remembered fondly, the two passages pay homage to a space – at once public and reassuringly intimate – that the northbound growth of the city seemed to have left behind, and not merely in spatial terms. James had experienced that upward movement first-hand when his family, in1848, had moved from No. 11, 5th Avenue to No. 58, West 14th Street, a vantage point from which the "quieter harmonies" of Washington Square, "so decent in its dignity, so instinctively unpretentious" (*Small* 83) seemed particularly appealing. The Washington Square area was also where, as a child, he had gone to school to receive instruction from a number of female teachers. That space was thus presided over by women who were benevolent guardians of rituals and manners the modern city would subsequently sweep away.

A prominent figure in that world was Mrs. Daly, a "stout red-faced lady with grey hair and a large apron" (*Small* 18) who kept school in an equally red little house. Indeed, in James's memory the lady and the house become one, to the point of sharing a complexion which, in his view, bespoke Irishness. James's biographer Sheldon Novick believes James must have been wrong about Mrs. Daly because it is "highly unlikely that an Irishwoman, given the prejudices of the day, would have kept a school for the children of the well-to-do in Washington Square" (458n). Regardless of whether Mrs. Daly was truly Irish, what is significant is that James associates her with the Irish presence in old New York, to which he alludes intermittently in the memoir. And while those references, more often than not, are colored by condescension and prejudice, James remembers the Irish presence as something familiar, almost reassuring. There is nothing remotely approaching the perturbation he experienced when he was confronted with other ethnic signs and sounds during his 1904-05 visit. Indeed, apart from the Irish, one is hardly aware of any immigrant presence in the New York of James's childhood. He does mention numerous foreigners, but their social extraction, profession, or the length of their stay in the city, would seem to mark them as other than immigrants. For example, James's eccentric foreign tutors, such as Mademoiselle Delavigne, appear to belong to the more genteel type of expatriate. And the children of

well-off Cuban and Mexican families who attended the Institution Vergnès at the same time as Henry and William did were exotic visitors. Their appearance, which James does describe with racially tinted language, is recalled as non-threatening precisely because their presence was temporary, as was also that "failure of blondness" in the student population, made all the more conspicuous by their brown and black complexions, "conducing" as they did in James's eyes, "to a greasy gloom" (*Small* 162).

Reading *A Small Boy and Others*, one would never imagine that mid-nineteenth-century New York was already, as Robert Ernst has put it, a "mecca of nationalities" (47). Nor would one recognize in James's New York the same multi-ethnic city depicted in such mid-nineteenth-century accounts as Lydia Maria Child's *Letters from New-York* (1843), Herman Melville's *Pierre* (1852), George Foster's *New York in Slices* (1849), and Thomas Butler Gunn's *The Physiology of New York Boarding Houses* (1857). There is no mention in *A Small Boy* of the Jewish community which, although considerably smaller in the 1840s and 50s than at the turn of the century, was already visible enough to elicit bigoted observations from Foster, Butler Gunn, and other writers. In sharp contrast to his own troubled and troubling response to New York's Jewish immigrants in *The American Scene*, in *A Small Boy* James seems to find solace in recollecting a time when, apparently, the only Jews who entered his world did so in the safe form of names, specifically those of two actresses of the French stage – Madame Judith (Julie Bernat) and Mademoiselle Rachel (Elisa Rachel Félix) – his father happened to mention to him (64). And while in *The American Scene* James recalls his startled reaction upon encountering a "flagrantly" foreign Italian immigrant (572) in Salem, of all places, in *A Small Boy* he basks in the memory of a New York in which the only Italians he came upon, so to speak, were opera singers, safely confined to the stage. If the Italian immigrant's speech in *The American Scene* struck him as jarring within the context, the names of the singers in *A Small Boy* are, quite literally, music to James's ears: Angiolina Bosio, Cesare Badiali,[7] Giorgio Ronconi, and Balbina Steffanone – one can almost sense the pleasure he must have taken in enunciating them to Miss Bosanquet. James also mentions Adelina Patti whom he saw perform, when she was still a child prodigy, at Castle Garden (*Small* 98), then a major venue for opera before

becoming in 1855 a landing depot for immigrants,[8] a fact to which James, tellingly, makes no allusion. It is an omission which is perfectly in tune with his recreation of New York as a city nearly untouched by foreign immigration.

James's conception of old New York as culturally and ethnically homogeneous appears to be encapsulated in the word *bonhomie*, in its original meaning of *good* nature. Although he uses it only thrice in the New York chapters of the book, the word *bonhomie* seems to reverberate throughout that section and to sum up "the manners of the time" (*Small* 39). It is especially embodied in Helen Wyckoff Perkins, James's mother's cousin. Childless, she devoted a large part of her life to looking after her mentally disabled brother Henry (who was her ward) and her orphaned nephew Albert. An emblem of what was best about old New York, she is singled out, in James's recollection, "for her fine old-time value of clearness and straightness." Mentally picturing her as portrayed by "a grave Dutch or other truth-seeking master," James sees "in her strong simplicity, that of an earlier, quieter world, a New York of better manners and better morals and homelier beliefs" (*Small* 104). The quieter world, the simpler, more urbane city with which James identifies her, is the same in which Trinity Church, not yet overshadowed by taller buildings, was "supereminent, pointedly absolute, the finest feature of the southward scene" (*Small* 57-58); or where the home-like Clarendon (located on Fourth Avenue and Eighteenth Street), rather than the nightmarishly artificial Waldorf Astoria James portrayed in *The American Scene* and "A Round of Visits," was "the latest thing in hotels" (*Small* 76). It was there that the artist Eyre Crow, who was travelling in the United States as William Thackeray's secretary, painted a portrait of James's father. The formidable figure of Thackeray also hovers over another portrait: Mathew Brady's 1854 daguerreotype of James and his father which was used as the frontispiece for the first edition of *A Small Boy*.[9] Thackeray was very much on young Henry's mind as he stood before Brady, wearing a tight-fitting, buttoned-up jacket that the English novelist had called "extraordinary" on a recent visit to the James's home (*Small* 74). As Mark Goble has noted, James's account of the day the daguerreotype was taken seems to last an inordinate amount of time (365-66). It is as if by slowing down the narrative pace almost to a halt, James

were mimicking the lengthy and laborious process through which the "lost art of the daguerreotype" (*Small* 75), as he calls it, captured an image. That art, like the humbler craftsmanship of the men in newspaper caps James saw at work decorating his new house on West 14th Street, had no place in the frenetic, "roaring city" (*Small* 82) he experienced in the twentieth century. The word "roaring" inevitably calls to mind the auditory assault to which James was subjected during his 1904-05 stay in New York, as rendered in painful detail in *The American Scene*. In that book, not only does New York din James's ears with a great deal of real noise, but it also chides him in a mocking, arrogant manner, taking him to task for his bewilderment and unease.[10] Significantly, in *A Small Boy and Others*, old New York, unlike its modern incarnation, keeps its mouth shut. The city that *does* talk to James is Paris, and it does so reassuringly, encouragingly, through its humanized old houses: "Yes, small staring jeune homme, we are dignity and memory and measure, we are conscience and proportion and taste, not to mention strong sense too" (*Small* 267). It is a voice that the elderly James, thinking back on this exceptionally formative European chapter of his childhood (1855-1857), recalls as welcoming him, as acknowledging that his wide-eyed – and probably open-mouthed – wonder was a most sincere form of appreciation and gratitude.

Notes

[1] Arguably the best-known magician, ventriloquist, and bird trainer of his time, Signor Blitz (1810-1877) wrote a colorful autobiography entitled *Fifty Years in the Magic Circle* (1871) and, subsequently, *Life and Adventures of Signor Blitz* (1872). His most sensational trick was catching a bullet in his teeth. Because of his great success, he had many imitators. In his autobiography, Signor Blitz lists as many as thirteen individuals who copied (sometimes with tiny variations in spelling) his stage name. His obituary appeared in the *New York Times* and other major American newspapers.

[2] On the genesis and development of *A Small Boy and Others*, see Philip Horne's "Notes on the Texts," in the American Library edition of James's *Autobiographies* (767-69).

[3] As he wrote to his nephew Harry on January 19, 1913, James regarded *A Small Boy* as evidence of the extent to which he had overcome the severe psychological and physical malady that had recently afflicted him (*The Letters*, 1920: 289). In a previous letter to Harry (September 23-24, 1912), James had marveled at the prodigious intensity with which his childhood recollections had come back to him: "it was a miracle to me (and still is as I go on further) how the memories revived and pressed upon me" (*Henry James: Letters* 4: 794).

[4] Writing on Charles Baudelaire, one of Poe's most illustrious admirers, James claimed in 1876 that an "enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection" ("Charles Baudelaire" 154). However, this opinion had not prevented him from occasionally drawing inspiration (if not borrowing) from Poe, as for example (and very noticeably) in the story "Glasses" (1896). Earlier in his career (1865), James had been no less harsh in his review of Whitman's Civil War poems *Drum-Taps*: "this volume is an offense against art" ("Walt Whitman" 632).

[5] On James's rediscovery of Poe, see Burton R. Pollin's "Poe and Henry James: A Changing Relationship."

[6] James paid additional homage to Whitman – and essentially disowned his youthful review of *Drum-Taps* – in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, wherein he recalled "the tender elegiac tone" in which Whitman had "admirably" commemorated the American soldier. He also recalled when, like "dear old Walt," he had visited a hospital in which wounded soldiers received treatment during the Civil War (445, 447).

[7] As Peter Collister has pointed out, Badiali was also one of Whitman's favorite singers (98n). Whitman called him "the superbest of all superb baritones in my time" (qtd. in Traubel 2: 173).

[8] Before the opening of Ellis Island in 1892, Castle Garden "received approximately two thirds of all U.S. immigrants" (Bohem and Corey 153).

[9] For an analysis of Brady's daguerreotype and James's response to the medium of photography, see Schwarzschild.

[10] On James's response to New York's soundscape, see my "Listening to New York in *The American Scene*."

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