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A Caravan of Gypsies:
James, Sargent, and the American Symptom

Most Englishmen, in the process of acquiring a reputation, make the acquaintance of a considerable part of the globe: they travel, and they compare, and lay foreign hands under contribution. The same, for stronger reasons, is the case with Americans of corresponding rank; both of our English kinsmen and ourselves it may be said that we often become conspicuously national, only by leaving home.¹

In 1893 Henry James wrote an appreciative essay on his friend John Singer Sargent, whose refined style, bravura, and precocious success had propelled him into the forefront of international society portraiture. Continentalized from their earliest years, cosmopolitans with a penchant for society and the *beau monde*, exiled by their longing for aesthetic refinement, they were almost counterparts in their different media. The fact that they both chose the life of an expatriate was a reaction against the cultural limitations of the American environment.² Culturally precocious, unusually well-travelled, and recipients of an experimental education, James and Sargent had all the advantages of a cosmopolitan upbringing. They were thus, in many ways, atypical Americans: privileged, cultured, and accustomed to comparing life in different countries. They were pioneers in the American rediscovery of Europe, the enjoyment of culture and art, and the cultivation of the self. Finally, to both of them the question of home and belonging was highly relevant, as was the question the perpetual dislocation and chronic itinerancy.

Yet there were major differences. Not only did James never attain the success which accompanied Sargent's brilliant career from the very start—his far more difficult art rejected any compromise in order to please the

public—but the choice of exile responded in him to deeper, existential motivations, involving a whole series of renunciations, and a corresponding sense of permanent loss and solitude.

In 1876 Henry James settled in London which was to remain his base, if not his home, for the rest of his life. His separation from his native country had been part of his youthful definition as an artist. From earliest childhood he had been awakened to that sense of Europe which was to become the primary motive for his own passionate pilgrimage. Behind his decision to live in Europe lay his relentless quest to widen the range of his awareness and to expand the outer limits of his extraordinary sensitivity to impressions. Even more important was his desire to turn away from the meager diet set before his complex sensibility by the American cultural scene in the 1860s and 1870s, and seek out the richer nourishment of the old European civilization. In his early, revealing study of Hawthorne (1879), James for the first time makes the case for the untenability or undesirability of American residence for a writer like himself: "the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, ... it takes a good deal of history to produce a little literature, ... it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion" (*Hawthorne* 3). The essay on his illustrious predecessor forced James to confront his feelings about America. Significantly, the book was attacked by most American critics for adopting a foreign attitude and emphasizing the parochial quality of New England life. The critics felt that James was losing his American perspective. James had indeed begun to perceive America as a land not only barren but actually hostile and he therefore opted for voluntary exile—a deliberate geographical and cultural displacement. One of the quintessential themes throughout his work is the process of sophistication which *homo americanus* undertakes in the Old World and the suffocating provincialism of a young nation where artistic culture is still inchoate and literature still mostly imported from abroad. As the protagonist of "The Madonna of the Future" cries,

We are the disinherited of art! . . . The soil of American perception is a poor little barren, artificial deposit . . . An American, to excel, has just ten times as much to learn as a European . . . We have neither taste, nor tact, nor force. How should we have them? Our crude and garish climate, our silent past, our deafening present, . . . are as void of all that nourishes and prompts and inspires the artist. We poor aspirants must live in perpetual exile. (*Collected Tales* 3:14-15. Henceforth C.T.)

Not only in his fiction but also in his art criticism, James insistently returns to this theme.

An American could not be long in England before he discovers that its inhabitants are a much more "accomplished" people than ourselves—that in those graceful arts which mitigate the severity of almost obligatory leisure they are infinitely more proficient. I should say that, in the educated classes, eight English persons out of ten have some small specialty of the artistic, scientific, or literary sort

English culture, then, so far as it is a luxury, is a child of leisure, whereas leisure, in America, has not yet reached that interesting period at which parental function begins to operate. . . . It is mere want of culture, I say, and not our native delicacy. Delicacy is shown, not in barren abstinence, but in beautiful performance. (P.E. 136-37)

England, which James elected as his adoptive country—representing as it did for him an ideal meeting point between old Europe and the Anglo-Saxon spirit—plays a peculiar role, not only culturally but sociologically as well.

If art is a fashion in England, at least it is a great fashion . . . the English have always bought pictures in quantity, and they certainly have often had the artistic intelligence to buy good ones. In England it has not been the sovereigns who have purchased, or the generals who have "lifted," and London accordingly boasts of no national collection equal to the gallery at Dresden or the Louvre. But English gentlemen have bought—with English bank notes—profusely, unremittingly, splendidly. (P.E. 136-37)

In 1884, in the Parisian house of Henrietta Reubell, a wealthy, eccentric American expatriate, James, nearly permanently exiled from his native land, met the young American art prodigy, John Singer Sargent.³ At only twenty-six, he was already at the height of his success. "Tall, athletic, ruddy-complexioned, dark-haired and dark-bearded with vivid grey-blue-eyes" (Edel 1962,45), Sargent was a handsome and extremely cultivated young man. He played the piano and the violin and spoke English, Italian, and French. He was a brilliant artist with the manners and temperament of a dandy and aesthete. To James's admiring eyes he was a quintessential European, a virtual distillation of Europe, an utterly atypical American product, a version of what Americans might become if transplanted and

Europeanized. As at home in Europe as in America, James was irresistibly attracted to him.

The only Franco-American product of importance here strikes me as young John Singer Sargent the painter, who has high talent, a charming nature, artistic and personal, and is civilized to his finger-tips. He is perhaps spoilsable—though I do not think he is spoiled. But I hope not, for I like him extremely; and the best of his work seems to me to have in it something exquisite.⁴

This idealized description not only betrays James's homoerotic response and sensibility—an ideal, sublimated homosexuality—but also reflects a form of latent narcissism in a man who cherished the image of himself as an arbiter of taste and decorum. With the arrival of Sargent, America had thus emerged from its isolation, and on a grand scale. The gap that James so often lamented seemed finally bridged. The apparently irreconcilable distance from Europe had been overcome, and his wait for a great master had finally ended. Sargent was an extremely talented painter, a tremendously self-confident American who had no fear of comparison with his European counterparts. Not only was he accepted by that sophisticated Parisian society so alluring to James, he had actually become its most sensitive and penetrating interpreter. Hence, at the very beginning of his celebrated essay on the painter, James immediately poses the question with understandable urgency: "Is Mr. Sargent in very fact an American painter?" He goes on to define ironically his Americanness as a "symptom," as if his Yankee origin were some kind of illness (*P.E.* 216).

Sargent had, in fact, recovered very early from this symptom. Born in Florence in 1865 to American parents who had been living abroad for several years and who were never to return permanently to the States, he saw his homeland for the first time when he was twenty. For a long time his only tangible connection with America was his passport. America had every right to claim him but his knowledge of the country was very slight. His first acquaintance with it came in 1876 when Mrs. Sargent took him to Philadelphia to see the centennial exhibition. His cousins were amazed by his foreign ways, and baffled by his accent and his sophistication. He had strange manners for a fellow American. After four months the Sargents went back to Europe. They returned "home."⁵ His father was a Philadelphia physician who had been persuaded by his wife, a woman of

wealth and artistic taste, to forsake his profession and leave behind the vulgarities of the New World. The Sargents had never intended to stay abroad, yet they never quite managed the return crossing. They conducted a restless nomadic existence, settling nowhere for more than three months at a time. Thus Sargent spent his childhood wandering from Paris to the Alps, from Capri to the Côte d'Azur, from Spain to Switzerland, never settling anywhere, shifting from boarding schools to furnished apartments to hotels. Even more so than the young James, Sargent was a "hotel boy" who was to end his life much as he began it—as a tourist. He was at home everywhere, yet belonged nowhere.

In 1891 James wrote "The Pupil,"⁶ one of his finer stories in which he dramatized both the issue of homosexuality (the relationship between the tutor Pemberton and the young boy has overt homoerotic undertones) and that of nomadism. The tale of the Moreens, "an odd, extravagant band of high but rather unauthenticated pretensions" (*C.T* 7: 188-89), who wandered "like a caravan of gypsies," jumping hotel bills, "living one year like ambassadors and the next like paupers," seems to be based on Sargent's unhappy childhood. The painter had indeed spoken with loathing of his early vagabond years, dragged as he was to and fro by his parents who rushed about Europe, trying to "get in with people who did not want them" (Brooks 161). However, in his story James also drew upon the young boy he himself had been. The tale of the Moreens in fact was, to a certain extent, the tale of James's own nomadic childhood. While Mr. and Mrs. Moreen, whose "whole view of life was speculative and rapacious and mean," certainly bear little resemblance to Mr. and Mrs. James, their restless travels are a sort of parody of his family's itinerant existence. The parallels between Morgan and Henry junior are striking.⁷ James too had been a delicate, sensitive, vulnerable child ("they recognized that he was of a finer clay . . . and called him a little angel") only too aware of the precarious financial situation of his parents, who had to beat a hasty retreat from Paris to Boulogne-sur-Mer after the American depression of 1856-57. While his father was convinced of the benefits of travel—Henry was taken abroad on the first of the journeys that were to become the recurrent feature of his life when he was less than one year old—the young boy yearned to belong and be part of a settled world. His father's unconventional principles found their most practical outlet in the liberal and peripatetic education of his children. He was forever hunting out improved quarters for the family and

better teachers for the children. In 1855 the entire family travelled to Europe where they lived on and off for five years in London, Paris, Boulogne, and Bonn, setting up temporary residences and engaging in fleeting educational ventures. William was later to complain that this haphazard schooling had retarded his development as a scientist (Dupee 29). Robertson, the youngest brother, confessed he sometimes believed he was a foundling (Maher 27).

By the time James was twenty, one third of his life had been spent in foreign countries. The pain James suffered in this life of perpetual dislocation is revealed by the poignant representation of the world of children portrayed in his fiction: little heroes who are alone or abandoned, victims of displacement or neglect. The price of that vagabond life was loneliness and the exile of affection.⁸ Neglected by their parents and often handed over to tutors and governesses, these children end up developing intimate relationships with them, which at times verge on the homoerotic. Again, in "The Pupil," a sad, and patently autobiographical fable, James wove a tale of a sensitive boy and his attachment to his tutor, "the first of a series in the 1890s in which children suffer from parental neglect and little boys die asserting their claim to live" (Edel 1985, 429). Driven from their lodgings, the Moreens finally decide to hand over their son to the intelligent and penniless tutor. The shock of happiness at the prospect of escape immediately gives way to devastation when the boy sees Pemberton's hesitation and fear. Betrayed by his parents, crushed by the sight of his beloved companion's indecision, too young to cope with disappointment, Morgan succumbs to "the shock and violent emotion" and dies—as does Miles who, in *The Turn of the Screw*, is presented by James as being quite literally too good for the world of disillusioned adults.

Like James, Sargent had not received a traditional education. Sargent's mother claimed that Europe more than compensated for the advantages of the schoolroom. Museums and capital cities had been his playgrounds. As lonely as the children in James's fiction, he learned to depend on himself alone for entertainment and stimulation. Neither man married or had children or established long-term relationships. Like James, the confirmed bachelor, Sargent too was probably homosexual. The hundreds of charcoal male nudes which he drew from 1891 to the 1920s of many Italian models, especially the strikingly virile Nicola d'Inverno who later became his inseparable companion and valet, reveal his sexual bent.⁹

Yet both were indefatigable observers of women, in art as in literature, creating innumerable "Portraits of a Lady." James's celibacy and decision to become an expatriate must be regarded in this light: "I am 37 years old, I have made my choice. . . . Such an experience," he wrote in his notebooks on November 1881, "is an education—it fortifies the character and embellishes the mind. . . . I take it as an artist and as a bachelor" (*Notebooks* 23, 27, 28). Certainly, Europe represented for him a sort of spiritual and intellectual survival. However, behind this choice—a key issue in both James's life and the lives of his fictional characters—there were also unmistakably, more personal, and perhaps more urgent motivations involving his homosexuality. As well as providing intellectual and physical rehabilitation (James from childhood on cherished the image of himself as a *quasi* invalid), "Europe protected him from the social expectations of all necessary verification of masculinity, the institution of marriage" (Logan 35-36). James's rejection of marriage was based not only on his credo of devotion to art, but on his homoerotic sensibility. "His real objects of desire were ones that he had strong reasons to de-eroticize as much as possible" (Kaplan 299).

Outlining the major phases in Sargent's career, James writes that after having studied briefly in Rome and in Florence, in 1874 the promising painter moved with his family to Paris, the "irresistible city" where he immediately entered the studio of Carolus Duran, a competent if second-rate French artist of the day. He first revealed his extraordinary talent in 1877, "at the age of twenty-two, in the portrait of that master,"¹⁰ Faced with Carolus Duran's "brilliant portrait," possibly the most influential of his early works, James almost reluctantly writes that Sargent "was already in possession of a style. . . . As he saw and 'rendered' ten years ago, so he sees and renders today" (*P.E.* 228).

It is difficult to imagine a young painter less in the dark about his own ideal, more lucid and more responsible from the first about what he desires. . . . he gives us the sense that the intention and the art of carrying it out are for him one and the same thing. . . . perception with him is already a kind of execution. . . . It is as if painting were pure tact vision, a simple manner of feeling. (*P.E.* 217)

Sargent, America's most conspicuous expatriate, was also the major figure of the Paris-trained generation of the seventies. Many American

artists had worked or were living in Paris: La Farge, Vedder, Porter, Cassat, Hunt, and even such a staunch realist as Winslow Homer. But only Sargent, as James put it, "could be mistaken for a Frenchman." At Carolus Duran's atelier on the Boulevard Montparnasse, Sargent was utterly unlike his fellow students, who were almost exclusively American at that time: he was older than his years, better educated, more worldly, confident, and highly sophisticated. His fellow students were dazzled. Sargent was again among exiles.¹¹

Following in the steps of Carolus Duran, Sargent derived most of his inspiration and income from the fashionable world of high society. He was a brilliant and precocious pupil and he emerged from his schooling with perhaps the most thoroughly trained and controlled talent America could boast at the time. He thus stepped into the glare of public recognition from the very start of his career, as James was quick to perceive.

While in Paris, Sargent drew a great deal upon the language of impressionism:

From the time of his first successes at the salon he was hailed, I believe, as a recruit of high value to the camp of the Impressionists, and today he is for many people most conveniently pigeon-holed under that head. (*P.E.* 217)

In an earlier essay James had displayed an attitude towards impressionism which reflected nearly all the criticism accompanying the first impressionist exhibitions.¹² As Edel points out, "it strikes one as strange that an artist who spoke of 'texture and tone,' of 'atmospheric mysteries and complexities,' should have written with such disparagement of the Impressionists" (*Parisian Sketches XXI-XXII*). In 1876 James had attended the second exhibition of the impressionists at Durand Ruel's gallery. The show comprised 252 paintings, pastels, water-colors, drawings, and etchings by twenty exhibitors, including Degas, Monet, Morisot, and Renoir. Apparently considering none of the artists worth naming, he wrote:

The young contributors to the exhibition of which I speak are partisans of unadorned reality and absolute foes to arrangement, embellishment, selection, to the artist's allowing himself, as he has hitherto, since art began, found his best account in doing, to be preoccupied with the idea of the beautiful. The beautiful, to them, is what the supernatural is to the Positivists—a metaphysical notion, which can only get one into a muddle and is to be severely let alone. . . . The painter's proper field is the actual, and

to give a vivid impression of how a thing happens to look, at a particular moment, is the essence of his mission . . . the Impressionists . . . abjure virtue altogether, and declare that a subject which has been crudely chosen shall be loosely treated. They send details to the dogs and concentrate themselves on general expression. (*P.E.* 114-15)

Considering the almost unanimous hostility which accompanied the movement up to the 1890s (Venturi 51), it is hardly surprising that James should make this controversial remark regarding the greatest revolution in modern art—impressionism indeed brought about the end of realism.¹³ While in retrospect the first exhibitions of the impressionists strike us as momentous, their impact at the time was very slight. The majority of visitors came to laugh and mock. American critics were confused about the meaning of the movement until the great French impressionist display was brought by Durand-Ruel to New York in the spring of 1886. Until that time, sketchy, seemingly incomplete canvases were identified with the French aesthetics. Like most contemporary reviewers, James criticized the impressionists for their slighting of subject matter, a major reason for their unpopularity up to 1890. Since their material was entirely drawn from direct observation and from their direct personal experience, their paintings could not tell stories and therefore seemed insignificant, ordinary, and uninteresting. The role that narrative subjects and "human interest" had played in conventional art shifted to the spectacle of physical nature in its endless change (Eitner 339). Unlike the Pre-Raphaelites, to whom James moralistically—*à la* Ruskin—compared them, the impressionists refrained from literary, symbolic representation, and rejected all embellishment and compositional arrangements for an art based on immediate observation and on the direct study of nature:

When the English realists "went in," as the phrase is, for hard truth and stern facts, an irresistible instinct for righteousness caused them to try and purchase forgiveness for their infidelity to the old more or less moral proprieties and conventionalities, by being above all laborious . . . The Englishmen, in a word, were pedants, the French are cynics. (*P.E.* 115)

In fact, one of the aspects of impressionism that most disturbed contemporaries was its indifference to ideas. Its materialist premises—that the basis of painting was vision, light, and color—excluded a wide range of

themes and subjects, such as material drawn from literature or history. James also criticized the impressionists for their unfinished brushwork. Unlike other landscape painters, unlike the Barbizon artists whom he greatly admired, the impressionists did not rearrange or compose their motifs. Their paintings were an immediate response to experience rather than a deliberate ordering or transformation. As a consequence, the precise drawing, high finish, and profuse detail so important to James and so conspicuous in Pre-Raphaelite art were not merely irrelevant but actually detrimental.

Sargent had indeed made experiments in impressionism, especially in the period 1880-89, although he can be considered "impressionist" only in the very broadest sense of the word. If some of his works reveal a flirtation with the French aesthetics (landscapes are loosely worked, in somewhat broken color, recording momentary effects with a spontaneous, relatively "unfinished" brushwork), the figures are still carefully drawn and rather roundly modeled. James could accept Sargent's impressionism precisely because it never reached a complete disintegration of form. Sargent always tended towards firmer, more conventionally representational and structured imagery. He never aimed at a radical dissolution of form. His prodigious power of assimilation meant that he could draw not only upon impressionism but also on "the god of his idolatry," Velasquez (*P.E.* 231). He evolved a style entirely his own which harked back to his American realistic tradition while revealing great admiration for Velasquez, as in *The Lady with a Rose* and the beautiful group portrait *The Daughters of Edward D. Boit*.

The artist has done nothing more felicitous and interesting than this view of a rich, dim, rather generalized French interior (the perspective of a hall with a shining floor, where screens and tall Japanese vases shimmer and loom), which encloses the life and seems to form the happy play-world of a family of charming children. The treatment is eminently unconventional, and there is none of the usual symmetrical balancing of the figures in the foreground. The place is regarded as a whole; it is a scene, a comprehensive impression; yet none the less do the little figures in their white pinafores (when was the pinafore ever painted with that power and made so poetic?) detach themselves and live a personal life. (*P.E.* 222)

Sargent thus seemed to fulfill James's international idea of culture as

a synthesis of the European tradition. His American dispensation allowed him the freedom to pick and choose, transcend the limitations of narrow European nationalisms, and seek new combinations and unexplored opportunities. Art, like literature, need not, and indeed should not, be parochial. The best art should combine national characteristics with international (that is to say, European) experience. In an oft-quoted letter to his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry, James as early as 1876 had written:

We are Americans born—*il faut en prendre son parti*. I look upon it as a great blessing; and I think that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc.) claim our property wherever we find it. (*Letters* 1: 77)

James's life-long concern for the international theme—perhaps the theme he found most congenial and which he seemed to have devised in response to his own need to remain distant yet close to America (Perosa 1985, xvi)¹⁴—can be viewed as an effort to comment upon the complications and ambiguities of the marriage between America and Britain (Kaplan 291). James's interest in the predicament of Americans in Europe, as well as his preoccupation with the interrelations of the representatives of transatlantic cultures, probably sprang from his attempt to externalize his personal concern with his own reactions as an American plunging into the European scene.

Interestingly, in his essay on Sargent James does not mention any of the painter's impressionist pictures such as his outdoor landscapes and his series of paintings with artists working at their easels, a significant motif of the French impressionists since the late 1860s. It is also true, however, that Sargent best expressed himself in portraiture, and that he specialized in the *portraits d'apparat*, catching a subject in a casual and yet characteristic moment, defining a whole life-style and cultural setting without any loss of the individual. He sought a grand manner and never became a true impressionist, however "impressionist" some of his paintings seemed. Claude Monet once remarked: "he was not an impressionist as we used the term, he was always too influenced by Carolus Duran."¹⁵ Whether he was aware that Sargent's greatness lay not in his few impressionist pieces but in

his portraits, or due to his own keen interest in that genre, James commented only on Sargent as a portrait painter.

It was one of those portraits—*Madame X*, exhibited at the 1884 Salon—which was to occasion Sargent's decisive transfer to London. *Madame X* was the pseudonym for the glamorous and provocative Virginie Avegno Gautreau, the expatriate American wife of a Parisian banker. James wrote that this portrait "excited a kind of unreasoned scandal . . . This superb picture, noble in conception and masterly in line, this figure represents something of the high relief of the profile images on great friezes" (*P.E.* 226). The haughty sensuality and the defiant transgression of academic rules implied in her arrogant profile, daring décolleté and bare arms, outraged the critics. Taken aback by this unexpected attack, in 1885 Sargent decided to move to London, which was thereafter to be his headquarters for life. This decision was heartily encouraged by James: "I want him to come here to live and work—there being such a field in London for a *real* painter of women, and such magnificent subjects, of both sexes" (*Letters* 3: 42). The transfer was viewed by James as an act of emancipation from the French pictorial tradition.

He seems to me to have got from Paris all that Paris had to give him—viz. the perfect possession of his technical means. Paris taught him how to paint so well that she can't teach him better, and I don't see why he is not wise to apply all his acquired power here, where he can get such fine models and subjects. Besides I think an artist does his work better in the conditions in which the whole man is happier and finds a larger and more various life. I mean by this that Sargent seems to me to *like* London, its social opportunities and great variety, and that in itself is good for him, even as an artist. Why, therefore, should he be chained all his life to the school from which he has graduated? He appears to me today to be more qualified to teach than to learn, and his teaching is far more needed here than in Paris. (*Letters* 3: 117, 119)

Sargent's virtuosity, combined with a sense of the elegant, made him a leading portrait painter of the period. Most of the notable figures of the day were recorded by his brush: college presidents, captains of industry, leaders in society and the arts. His fame rivalled that of Van Dyck, Gainsborough, and Reynolds, and was soon to reach America where he swiftly became one of the most celebrated and prolific artists of the time. By 1909 he had painted almost 500 portraits. In 1897 Sargent was elected to

the National Academy of Design in New York and the Royal Academy in London, and was made an officer of the *Légion d'honneur* in France.

At the very beginning of his essay James pointed out the problem of Sargent's precocious and astonishing bravura when he spoke of writing "almost prematurely of a career which is not yet unfolded." Some of Sargent's works elicited his most unqualified praise. James "absolutely adored" the portrait of the Curtis family at Palazzo Barbaro—"I've seen few things of Sargent that I have craved more to possess."¹⁶ But this did not prevent him from occasionally criticizing the facility and shallowness of his work. He felt like asking himself "unanswerable questions," wondering whether the bravura of his style was brilliant or simply slick:

... in relation to [*The Hall with Four Children*] I must repeat what I said about the young lady with the flower, that it is the sort of work which, when produced in youth, leads the spectator to ask unanswerable questions. He finds himself murmuring "Yes, but what is left?" and even wondering whether it is an advantage to an artist to obtain early in life such possession of his means that the struggle with them, discipline, *tâtonnements*, cease to exist for him. May not this breed an irresponsibility of cleverness, a wantonness, an irreverence—what is vulgarly termed a "larkiness"—on the part of the youthful genius who has, as it were, all his fortune in his pocket? (*P.E.* 223)

For all its urbane tone, this paragraph vibrates with criticism and even, possibly, jealousy—an understandable reaction in the light of James's constant sense that he was an unsuccessful novelist, dropping masterpieces into a void of indifference. Not only did he not sell; he was not even talked about. The fact that he was admired by an intellectual elite did not compensate for his poor sales. His lack of financial success, the pain of being "the most famous unread writer in the world," exacerbated his already shaky sense of self. He would have to wait many years to see his work recognized. With an irony that often sharpened into irritation, he wrote of the vulgarity of success." Thus, while greatly admiring Sargent, he felt "critical even in his warmest admiration" and "believed that it may be better for an artist to have a certain part of his property invested in unsolved difficulties" (*P.E.* 223).

James and Sargent also had different attitudes towards their mother land. The painter was always to consider himself entirely American.¹⁸ At the

outbreak of the war, their different reactions were telling. While James, in Rye, was concerned with the fate of his friends from his adoptive city and felt that he was living under "the funeral spell of a murdered civilization," Sargent was busy painting in Tyrol. His strongest gesture was to resign from the Berlin Academy, whereas James made the boldest statement in his power by applying for British citizenship.

James's exile, unlike Sargent's, had a dark side. One of his constant concerns was the fear of being excluded from the European experience. In a letter to Grace Norton he confessed that after a year in Italy he had "hardly spoken to an Italian creature save washerwomen and waiters," and that there was an "absurd want of reciprocity between Italy itself and all [his] rhapsodies about it" (*Letters* 1: 428). Though he felt that he had more literary and social opportunities in London than in New York, at times he felt hostile to the culture in which he had chosen to live (Tanner 205). He was keenly aware of his permanent status as an outsider. Having left America, he had deliberately alienated his family and the friends of his youth. He also recognized that Europeans would never accept him as a European and that he would never think of himself as anything but American. Whatever he wrote was shot through with the awareness of loss, deracination, and separation. In 1900, in a letter to Morton Fullerton, an American trying to make his living as a journalist in Paris, James, the long-committed expatriate, the withdrawn witness of other lives, confessed: "The port from which I set out was, I think, that of the essential loneliness of my life ... This loneliness, ... deeper about *me*, at any rate, than anything else: deeper than my genius, deeper than my 'discipline,' deeper than my pride, deeper, above all, than the deep countermining of art" (*Letters* 4: 170).

And yet, when he returned home in 1881, America seemed barren, alien, and lacking substance. He felt a stranger, an exile in the city of his birth, a permanent outsider rather than the visiting son. He repatriated himself reluctantly, living in hotels or as a guest, sending long letters back to friends in England. He returned home only to become an exile. His visit in 1904 was even more traumatic.

Home and belonging were excruciatingly significant for James. In his book on the expatriate American artist William Wetmore Story, published in 1903—an unusual mixture of biography, documents, and autobiographical reminiscences—he wrote "that a man always pays, in one way

or another, for expatriation, for detachment from his plain primary heritage" (*William Wetmore Story* 1: 333), and that "Story paid—paid for having sought his development even among circumstances that at the time of his choice appeared not the only propitious, but the only possible" (2: 222-23). James, the long-committed expatriate, was undeniably referring also to himself.

Indeed, many of the characters near to his heart and sensibility are precisely those who, like Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima*, Miriam Roth and Gabriel Nash in *The Tragic Muse*, Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove*, and Fleda Vetch in *The Spoils of Poynton*, have no one to turn to, nowhere to go, indeed nowhere to be. They are, like himself, displaced from America to Europe, and in a subtler sense, from life to art. They are somewhat rootless figures, wanderers over continents, "vagabonds," drifting, fleeting, transient presences, perpetual tourists. Perhaps the most emblematic figure is that of the middle-aged, melancholic, sexually inactive bachelor Lambert Strether who, by nature and intelligence, is closer to his maker than any other earlier hero. Like James himself, Strether is alone, unmarried, and homeless. In returning to America he returns to a void, to that "spacious vacancy" so alarming to James.¹⁹

"Void" and "vacancy" are perhaps the most frequent words in *The American Scene*, his remarkable travel book written after some 20 years' absence from the United States. James returned in 1904, as he says in his Preface, "fresh as an inquiring stranger," eager to reassess and reclaim his roots which had never been severed in spite of his prolonged residence in Europe. In some way, the visit answered the old riddle—a double exile. The America he returned to was very different from the land he had left. A backward, provincial, preeminently rural continent had given way to a "monster" bent on commerce and "pecuniary gain" with its attendant ideas of violence, competition, and vulgar ambition. What further horrified him was its formlessness,²⁰ and especially the destruction of what little past America possessed: whole streets and buildings torn down to make way for the new skyscrapers, in their turn to be the victims of a planned obsolescence in which nothing is permanent.

We have only to read the last stories which derived from his American journey to see how bleak his vision had become, how the "Return of the Native" had been a shattering, devastating experience. This initial title for *The American Scene* (used before by Hardy) is poignantly revealing: it

became increasingly clear that James was no "native" returning to a beloved land but, rather, an alien observer. His experience is dramatized in "The Jolly Corner," a psychological ghost story set in New York City. The protagonist, Spencer Brydon, returns home only to find a ghost-like *Doppel-gänger* figure. In its horrifying *coup-de-théâtre*, the figure discloses his horribly disfigured face and maimed hand. This can be read as a retrospective vision of what Brydon would have become if he had stayed, but it can be interpreted as a long-forgotten castration complex as well. If James's hero had remained, he would have lost his capacity to write.

His last tale, "A Round of Visits," equally reflects not only James's self-doubt, acute disillusion, and quest for identity, but also a personal betrayal as the protagonist, returning to New York after 20 years abroad, learns that he has been robbed by one of his best friends.

Indeed, where was home for James? After visiting his brother in London in 1889, William James wrote that the middle-aged Harry had

covered himself, like some marine crustacean, with all sorts of material growths, rich sea-weeds and rigid barnacles and things, and lives hidden in the midst of his strange heavy alien manners and customs; but these are all but "protective resemblances," under which the same dear old, good, innocent and at bottom very powerless-feeling Harry remains, caring for little but his writing, and full of dutifulness and affection for all gentle things. Beneath all the accretions of years and the world, he is still the same dear innocent old Harry of our youth. He is really, I won't say a yankee, but a native of the James family and has no other country.²¹

But his brother's deracination was both more simple and more complex. Henry did have another country. For James, the country for which he had left America was not England but art.

Tried by the years, worn out by ill health, grieved by the death of many friends and relatives, and embittered by his public lack of acclaim, James wrote to Henrietta Reubell how happy he would be to see his old friend Sargent again if only he, too, had not, seemingly, disappeared, not into oblivion but into the impossibly distant, unattainable planet of success. Sargent, wrote James, moved

in an orbit so much larger and higher than mine that I only see him as you see a far sail, at sea, passing on the horizon—a big shining ship that leaves your own steamer behind. He sails over the rim and the great curve of the globe—straight for the Golden Isles.²²

¹ Henry James, "The Letters of Eugene Delacroix," *The Painter's Eye, 187-88*. Quotations from this volume will be identified henceforth as *PE*

² Though James's and Sargent's cosmopolitanism had biographical roots, it reflected the aestheticizing tendencies of the later nineteenth century. The expatriate element in American art assumed a prominence after 1875 that it had never had before. The cosmopolitan ideal was especially compelling to that generation of artists as Europe seemed to be experiencing an astonishing cultural growth. The history of this period shows that American artists continued to look towards Europe for instruction and they flocked to the various centers of European culture—first to London, then Rome, Munich, and finally Paris. The desire to enjoy a world culture was as strong as the nineteenth-century demand for a national emphasis in art. The term cosmopolitanism did not mean copying European models or grafting older styles onto a native art, but it involved a sense of modern experimentation.

³ "He already knew his work and had stood in admiration before the striking picture of the young Bait daughters, which Sargent had done a year before, and certain other precocities, painted when he was barely in his twenties." Edell 1962, 44.

⁴ Henry James, letter to Crace Norton, 23 Feb. 1884, *Letters* 3: 32.

⁵ See S. Olson, "On the Question of Sargent's Nationality." Hills 13-25.

⁶ The "germ" for the story was suggested to James by an American doctor practicing in Florence who told him of a "wonderful American family, an odd adventurous, extravagant band, of high but rather unauthenticated pretensions, the most interesting member of which was a small boy, acute and precocious, afflicted with a heart of weak action, but beautifully intelligent, who saw their prowling precarious life exactly as it was, and measured and judged it, and measured and judged *them*, all around, ever so quaintly; presenting himself in short as an extraordinary little person." *The Art of the Novel, 150-51*. This tale of an unscrupulous, pretentious, and dishonest family and of the morbid attachment between the young Morgan and his older tutor was rejected by the *Atlantic Monthly*. It was, however, immediately published in England by *Longman's Magazine* in March-April 1891.

⁷ "Morgan goes from twelve to fifteen in the course of the narrative. Henry's age increased from twelve on the departure for Europe, to fifteen by the end of his stay in Boulogne. And if 'The Pupil' ends with the death of Morgan Moreen, Henry Junior's first autobiographical volume, *A Small Boy and Others*, concludes in a dreamy dramatic manner with Henry, clutched by pain and terror falling into unconsciousness." Lewis 88-89.

⁸ Kelly Canon argues that this image of James as an orphan—a pose of essential powerlessness in the social hierarchy—was also one which entailed a freedom "from discipline and social responsibility" (35). I think, however, that this image emphasizes a deep-seated sense of loneliness and abandonment rather than freedom.

⁹ Pressed by hundreds of commissions, Sargent told Charles Knowles Bolton, the librarian of the Boston Athenaeum who was to sit for a portrait, that "men were easier to do than women." He also made a telling comment on his attitude towards women: "I lost my nerve for portraits long ago when harassed by mothers, critical wives and sisters." Quoted in Hills, "A Portfolio of Drawings," 270. Lubin writes that if we look at James's, Sargent's, and Eakins's personal histories and to the question of how they related to women, both in general and in particular, and how they responded to the feminine within themselves, "one is struck by "several common biographical elements in the lives of these artists, despite the many

conspicuous differences. All three men appear to have been emotionally devoted to their mothers and yet guiltily eager to become free, if not of them in particular, then of later substitute matriarchal figures . . . All three artists experienced close but probably nonsexual companionship with women to whom they were neither married nor, so far as we can ascertain, romantically involved. All three spent large portions of their adulthood living and working in female-dominated society. Finally, they all seem to have sought out the companionship of men at least in part as an antidote to their social, familial and professional relations with women" (19). Lubin then argues that James's, Eakins's, and Sargent's repressed homoerotic tendencies "brought about in each an unusually close identification with women and, at the same time, a negative reaction to them. I do not mean to suggest that these three men were closet homosexuals or closet misogynists" but that "their personal lives were filled with a deep-seated, deeply hidden sexual ambivalence brought into relief by their lack of participation in the war and in the efficiently businesslike, often self-congratulatory, male culture that followed in its wake. It was their ambivalence out of which much of their art sprang and by which much of it is informed" (20).

¹⁰ Cf. A. Boime, "Sargent in Paris and in London: A Portrait of the Artist as Dorian Gray," *Hills* 81-82. "The vast ambitions the Sargents had for their son prompted them to move to Paris in 1874 in order to ensure him the best instruction. They carefully weighed their plans and finally decided to enter him in the atelier of Duran, whose reputation was known to them through their social contacts. They wanted Sargent to acquire the skills needed to make a living doing fashionable portraits and thus, move up the social and economic ladder." Carolus Duran exerted a powerful influence on the development of Sargent's style. "It is not simply that his technique appealed to those dissatisfied with the typical Academic grind, but that his ideas about art were infinitely marketable in that period. Despite his origins as a disciple of Courbet, during the Second Empire, he threw in with the élite of the Third Republic who wanted an elegant image of themselves at the time they were recovering from the blows of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune. The ideals of this élite were embodied in the magazine *L'illustration*, a right-of-center periodical which attacked the realist novelist Zola and the Impressionists" (82).

¹¹ L'Atelier des élèves de Carolus Duran soon became a haven for American pupils. Like Rome for the previous generation, Paris had a magnetic attraction for artists. By the time Sargent was established, the American population there was considerable and the studio exclusively American.

¹² "One of the most humorous reviews, by Louis Leroy writing in *Charivari*, belabored the title of one of Monet's paintings, a harbor scene with rising sun, that the artist had labeled *Impression, Sunrise*. Playing with the word 'Impression,' Leroy ended by dubbing the whole exhibition as 'Impressionist.' He meant by this term to describe the unfinished, haphazardous, slovenly look of many of the paintings. The term stuck, being taken up by the public and by the artists themselves. If throughout the 1880s, owing in part to better press criticism, interest in the Impressionists increased, it is still true that compared to the high reputation of Meissonier, Carolus Duran, Bouguereau, Gérôme, the Impressionists seemed insignificant, a fad, confined to a tiny eccentric minority" (Eitner, 335).

¹³ There is specific evidence that James modified his earlier attitude toward impressionism in his essay "New England: An Autumn Impression," reprinted in *The*

American Scene. Here James refers to a house in which "an array of modern 'impressionistic pictures, mainly French, wondrous examples of Manet, of Degas, of Claudet Monet, of Whistler, of other rare recent hands, treated us to the momentary effect of a large slippery sweet inserted, without warning, between the compressed lips of half-conscious inanity" (45-46).

¹⁴ See also "Italy in Henry James's International Theme," Lombardo and Tuttleton 48-65.

¹⁵ So in May 1926 Monet replied to Evan Charteris who had made a pilgrimage to his home in Giverny in preparation for his biography of John Singer Sargent. W. H. Gerdtts, "The Arch-Apostle of the Dab- and-Spot School: John Singer Sargent as an Impressionist," Hills 111.

¹⁶ Henry James' letter to Mrs. Curtis, 16 March 1899. Quoted in R. Mamoli Zorzi, "Un diario veneziano," Perosa 1987, 138.

¹⁷ "To be an artistic and social success and yet a financial failure, so that he had constantly to be writing for the magazines, was a burden James found humiliating—as we can see from his letters to his publishers. . . . His novels were in the periodicals, but in book form they did not sell. . . . They were esteemed but not even intelligently criticized. . . . He could not sit back and live on accumulated royalties—as Howells was doing in America and as the prodigy Rudyard Kipling did within two or three years of his leap to fame. . . . At fifty-two James pronounced himself a public failure. His audience had rejected him, and he had only the solace of private success and the encouragement of the artistic elite. But he could not, as he put it, take the measure of the 'great flat foot' of the public. . . . Readers of James's stories will recognize the sources of the wry humor in 'The Next Time,' 'The Lesson of the Master,' 'The Death of the Lion,' 'The Figure in the Carpet'—his tales of creative spirits cheapened by the marketplace" (Edel, introduction, *Letters* 3: xv-xvi).

¹⁸ As to the question of nationality, Sargent once wrote to James Abbot McNeil Whistler, "I have not been invited to retouch it and I keep my twang. If you should ever hear anything to the contrary, please state that there was no such transaction and that I am American." Quoted in S. Olson, Hills 24.

¹⁹ See Tanner 110-11. Bell suggests that "[t]he absence of other surviving family" makes Strether "one of those Jamesian orphans whose anteriority is thus disposed of, as was the case with Isabel Archer (despite her surviving sisters) and more absolutely the case with Milly Theale, whose many relatives perished before she came to Europe" (328).

²⁰ Lombardo argues that in *The American Scene* "Italy is not only frequently evoked but it is indeed offered as a model of form to a formless America." "Italy and the Artist in Henry James," 233.

²¹ William James, letter to his wife, 29 July 1889. Quoted in Matthiessen 303.

²² Henry James, letter to Henrietta Reubell, 22 Dec. 1903. Quoted in Kaplan 464.

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