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The Fostered Imagination:
Henry James's *A Small Boy and Others*

We will not anticipate the past! ...
Our retrospection will be all to the future.

Mrs. Malaprop, in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, IV, 2

1

A Small Boy and Others, which was to become the first volume of an "Autobiography" left unfinished at Henry James's death in the middle of the third volume, appeared after a long gestation in 1913. The following year, W. B. Yeats brought out his *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*. Despite the profound differences between the American expatriate and the Anglo-Irish poet (who was also, however, somewhat of an 'expatriate' in London), there are striking resemblances and parallelisms in the two works.

Both lack a pre-ordained plan or narrative scheme, and follow the random, fragmentary and inconsequential upsurge of memories, images, recollections. Yeats declares it at the outset, and divides his comparatively short book into compressed, isolated, and discontinuous sections. For James, '[t]o knock at the door of the past was in a word to see it open for me quite wide', freeing, as from Aladdin's lamp, a flow of images, figures, places, and recollections that flooded the mind, the scene, and the pages themselves. In the next volume, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, he was to write of an auscultation of the past, and to state that he had to pull from its jaws the plum of memory. But in *A Small Boy and Others*, doctoral or surgical images of hardness and strain are totally

out of place, images offer themselves easily and profusely,¹ so that eventually we have 'a tale of assimilations small and fine'.

Yeats moves from childhood scenes to minute, and sometimes confused, family details and cross-genealogies, descriptions of relatives (uncles and aunts, but mostly his grandparents) who would determine his future in a complex web of influences, and to his earliest artistic and literary discoveries. James proceeds in a similar way: he, too, betrays loneliness and fears, a precocious sense of instability, the joy and partially the pain of the complete freedom he is allowed to enjoy. Both move from place to place, from one country to another.

Both their fathers—an artist, in the case of Yeats, an unconventional thinker and philosopher in that of James—make sure that their sons are given complete freedom from religious bonds, institutions, and regular schools, from work and expectations of bourgeois success. Neither is occupied in getting on, in 'improving books' or habits: their only application is in imagination and sensibility. They are unfitted for most 'average' occupations, practical aims and ideals, for any 'profession' in the common sense of the word. Yeats's father detests merchants and shopkeepers; James's is at the head of a family that for two generations have been guiltless of a stroke of business (pp. 49-50, 56-58). 'My father—Yeats writes—had brought me up never when at school to think of the future or of any practical results'.² Both children have to suffer among friends on this account; both are cut off from actual performance and cut out for perplexity.

They are encouraged to develop their minds, to educate their 'senses', to cultivate and foster their imagination: in the 'free play of the mind', indeed in the riot or revel of 'the visiting mind' (as James wrote, p. 16), they can fulfill the aspiration *to be*, rather than *do*. The frequent moves to which they are subjected—Yeats from Sligo to Dublin and then to London, i.e. from a country-seat to a provincial, then to a cosmopolitan capital, James from Albany, the starting point of the family, to New York, to Brighton, Newport, and finally to Europe—are a means to those ends. Sounds, odors, colors, phantasmagorias of different sensations and images, mark their childhood imagination.

Yeats forms and exalts himself in the exercise of a 'wandering mind', eager for flights, excuses and evasions from reality; more than once, James insists on his processes of gaping, dawdling, dodging, removing himself from the hubbub of life, standing aside, being an onlooker. One writes of *reveries*, the other of *flâneries*, of an insisted-upon and sought-for detachment: James *riots and revels*, as we saw, in the 'visiting mind'; 'What was *I* thus, within and essentially, what had I ever been and could I ever be but a man of imagination at the active pitch?' (p. 455).

For both of them, contemplation, day-dreaming, the stimulation and cultivation of sensibility, artistic and otherwise, an existence 'floating in the midst of the actual', opening itself to reality, as it were, rather than creating or dominating it, substitute direct involvement in life, practical purposes or engagements. What matters is their reactions to places, peoples, books: their field of action is the sphere of the ineffectual, of the indirect or 'second application' (as James calls it in his *Prefaces*). In this perspective, their endless peregrinations and moves result in a liberation from provincialism (Irish, in one case, American, in the other), and from family ties, mild and loose as they may be: both play crucial games with the interrelation and interpenetration of inner and outer worlds, which prove essential to the nature and future role of the artist.

There are of course differences between Yeats's physical activism and James's detachment from the world; between the outdoor sports, riding and sailing, loves and visions, in which the former revels, and which the latter denies himself; between the romantic enthusiasms of the poet and the sober skepticism of the future novelist of manners. In Yeats, everything leads to a poetic calling or vocation; in James, it is the literary imagination that is fostered. Yet in both cases there is a programmed urge—self-induced as well as encouraged by their environment—towards an artistic vocation. Both *A Small Boy and Others* and *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* are texts that embody the discovery and the history of a developing imagination, of an artistic consciousness *in fieri*. James speaks explicitly of reconstituting 'the history of my fostered imagination', of recording 'the imaginative faculty under

cultivation' (p. 65 and 454, just as in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* he had considered the possibility of writing 'the history of the growth of one's imagination'); he registers a process of growth that reflects self-discovery and the discovery of the world of art.

Both their Autobiographies, then, can be properly read and considered as peculiar expositions of the imaginative growth of a literary genius, seen and presented—according to the autobiographical mode—from the height of achieved success, with no pre-conceived wish to codify, organize, *explain*, but rather following the easy, erratic, discontinuous, sometimes deceitful, and in all cases peremptory upsurge of images and memoirs. James's way of proceeding, in particular, is Proustian:³ the flow of recollections is released under the pressure of the spring of memory, which is unpredictable, unstoppable, uncontrollable. As in the beginning of *Du côté de chez Swann*, what matters is the first contact of an adolescent with the world—the happiest and most fruitful moment of an initially sketchy re-appropriation of the past.

What both writers added to their first volumes of *reminiscences*—*Notes of a Son and Brother* in the case of James, "The Trembling of the Veil", "Dramatis Personae", *et al.*, in the case of Yeats, which only later contributed to form their "Autobiographies"—does not seem to me to be up to their previous standards. And it is perhaps no mere chance or coincidence that *A Small Boy and Others* ends with a lapse of consciousness at Boulogne, while Yeats in the final section of *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* would write: 'when I think of all the books I have read, and of the wise words I have heard spoken, and of the anxiety I have given to parents and grandparents, and of the hopes that I have had, all life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for *something that never happened*' (p. 68, my italics).

The later 'I', trying to link and mingle itself with the lost 'I' of the past in order to recapture it, jumps over the abyss of time and seems to cancel the temporal distance; but spanning the abyss of time makes one dizzy, jeopardizes one's balance, induces a sort of mental void which is a counterpoint to the plenitude which is attained though memory.⁴

All this—the striking parallelisms with Yeats's *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, the joy and the disorientation of a partial, fragmentary, and suspended recapture of the past—is all the more remarkable in that James (to stay with him now) started from totally different premises and with remarkably different purposes. His 'Autobiography' was not only born against his expectations and his avowed aversion to self-revelation; it grew out of a revealing dislocation of a different intention, or indeed commitment: to write a memory of, or a testimonial to, his brother William, the world-famous philosopher who had died in 1910.

2

After the death of William, to whom he had been linked by a long, loving relationship, more than one literary misunderstanding, and some rivalry, James had promised his sister-in-law Alice to write a 'Family book' based on William's letters, papers, and activities—according to a well-established nineteenth-century pattern. But these were difficult times for him: the poor financial returns of the New York Edition of his *Novels and Tales*, on which he had lavished endless efforts and painstaking care, brought with it bouts of depression, possibly a nervous breakdown. He was in poor health, suffering from shingles, and had some difficulties in writing. When in the fall of 1911 he set down to write the 'Family book', according to the testimony of his typist, Theodora Bosanquet, he let himself go with the flow of memories: 'let my whole conscience and memory play on the past', he enjoined himself—he could trim, reduce, and eliminate later.⁵

This indulgence in the flow of memories entails and determines a gradual removal of William from the scene (James rationalized in a letter to his nephew that 'This whole record of early childhood simply *grew* so as one came to write it that one could but let it take its way'). The titles he had tentatively chosen (*Earliest Memories: Egotistic* and *Earliest Memories: Altruistic*) reflected this dichotomy only partially; what is undeniable is that young Henry took pride of place: 'I daresay I did instinctively regard [the book] at last as all *my* truth, to do what I would with', he wrote in a letter.⁶

Countless pages have been devoted to accounting for this removal of William from the scene, or his marginalization. Henry claimed or pretended that, first, he had to recreate a family atmosphere or ambience, and, secondly, that in order to use William's letters and papers, he had to provide a harmonious frame. But it has been variously observed that James's was a total appropriation of the scene, as well as of the past; in the later volumes, too, William appears rather marginally, and Henry's 'usurping consciousness' (the definition is from the Preface to *The Awkward Age*) settles itself at the center of things and acts in the first person mainly for its own, private, egotistical purposes. We have then the tale of the first steps in the education of an artist—Henry, of course, not William—with all the qualifying traits of an *autobiography*.

As I intimated, James had often declared an opposition to biography, autobiography, and the personal mode or utterance. On at least two occasions he had burned his personal papers (most notably in 1909 he had made a 'gigantic bonfire' of them), as Shakespeare had done, he threw a curse on anyone (the 'post-mortem exploiter') daring or attempting to write his life; in the Preface to *The Ambassadors* he had condemned 'the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation'; in a polemical exchange of letters with H. G. Wells he had insisted on the requirement not to speak directly of one's self and dismissed 'the accursed autobiographic form'.⁷

Yet an autobiographical impulse is detectable in his *Notebooks* (notably in the 'American Journals' of 1881-83 and 1904-05), and is more and more at work as James approaches his last years, in 'The Turning Point of my Life' (1900-01, *Complete Notebooks*) pp. 437-38), for instance. On previous occasions, too, he had shown a similar tendency to appropriate somebody else's rightful material for his own, personal uses. When just a few years before he had unwittingly agreed to write a biography of the expatriate sculptor William Wetmore Story according to the customary 'Life and Letters' form, he ended up by pushing him aside, and making up for the allegedly scanty material at hand with 'my own little personal memories, inferences, evocations and imaginations'. Writing about

a historical personage, he felt free (or compelled) not only to *invent* a book, but to give way to 'free imaginings', so that eventually he ended up—as his friend Henry Adams remarked—by writing 'the history of [their own, rather than Story's] generation', '—pure autobiography—': Story's expatriation and artistic fate were used, that is, to define a personal adventure—the question of expatriation itself, the gain and loss of being an expatriate.

In that book, the crucial question was one's relationship with Europe and expatriation. James's splendid reportage on the forsaken mother-country, which he revisited after a twenty-year absence, *The American Scene* (1907), was centered on his 'poet's quarrel' with it—a rather autobiographical coming to terms with his life and his existential choice. It has been noted that the *Notebook* entries in which James registered his first impact with childhood places already betrayed that elegiac and painful, enigmatic and revealing, accretion of personal remembrances that was to characterize his *Autobiography* a few years later, including a sense of displacement and vertigo.

These earlier texts were already a journey in search of a national and personal past: 'Everything sinks in; nothing is lost', he wrote in the *Notebooks*, so that he could plunge '[his] hand, [his] arm, *in*, deep and far, and up to the shoulder—into the heavy bag of remembrance—of suggestion—of imagination—of art', much in the same way as in the *Autobiography*. And, again, it has been widely remarked that James's well-known Prefaces to the New York Edition of his work (1907-09) are also a reconstruction of the very personal story of an artist. (Theodora Bosanquet, his amanuensis, remembered that they were dictated 'in the tone of personal reminiscence', and James himself, in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, summed up the experience as 'this infinitely interesting and amusing *act* of re-appropriation'). Even in his latest essays, and in particular in his essay on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Millgate has detected a strong autobiographical flavor.⁸

In order to write his 'Family book' James plunged into an uncertain past, and so his act of voluntary surrender to the flow of memories and associations turned *A Small Boy and Others* into a typical childhood autobiography, whose development reveals the

growth of an artist's imagination. The 'I' of 1911-13 evokes or recreates the 'I' of the boy in the past and, according to the autobiographical code, he achieves a second, therapeutic result. The very act of revisiting the past allows him to overcome his psychological, physical and mental difficulties, 'the heritage of woe of the last three years'. *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. (Incidentally, *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother* elicited a far greater response and success in the press and in the market than his preceding works, on which he had lavished so many efforts.)

That, moreover, the conscience of the narrating 'I' expands itself profusely on that of the narrated 'I', and that the protagonist in the past is made to re-appropriate voraciously every childhood experience, be it egotistical or altruistic, bears testimony to the fact that a typical autobiographical principle is at work here, in a book in which the old Master lets himself go without restraint in a self-reconstruction and a self-definition. That the 'I' of 1911-13 superimposes itself on the 'I', in the past, and that this in turn is presented as a budding artist in terms of the writer writing about him, provides further evidence of an autobiographical code which by definition entails a joining together of past and present.

Freud has reminded us in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that the individual is 'obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of ... remembering it as something belonging to the past', and this, even outside the Freudian context, proved a liberating experience for James, on the personal as well as the artistic level." Or, as Mrs. Malaprop puts it in Sheridan's play *The Rivals*, in one of her notorious malapropisms, which is however perfectly to the point here: 'our retrospection will be all to the future'.

Even in the very texture of James's book one can easily detect the 'I' of today (1911-13) observing, scrutinizing, scanning and projecting the 'I' of the past, and creating thereby not only a

double perspective, but a *double exposure*: in general, the image of the child is vividly and precisely conveyed in his acts, sensations, urges, discoveries, but in some cases it is obscured, muddled, confused, blurred, and only gradually is it revealed and focused as a recognizable entity. The act of writing combines vision and subsequent recognition, far-away glimmerings and gained awareness. No wonder that the boy must take in, or take into himself, engulf and introvert, the Other (including his brother William) and that this conjuror over the abyss of time must indulge in what is primarily a self-narration-s-the autobiography of the childhood education of an artist.

3

James's narration can be defined as the history of a 'generation', both in an individual and personal sense (being born or generated as a child and as an artist), and in the general sense of a period that is defined by temporal, environmental, social and community bonds. He can be said to evoke his past according to a compositional pattern of 'accretions', substituting cause-and-effect sequentiality with the casualness of free associations, which only in time will acquire representational value, much in the way of De Quincey's *Confessions* (or indeed of Proust). The past recovered as a palimpsest of impressions and experiences is 'alive' and 'in action' because it is mainly pursued or reflected on psychological states that make it coexist with the experience of remembering. For an 'objective' representation of the past James substitutes—or intermingles—a representation of the 'I' in the process of taking in, absorbing, the past, perceiving the process of its manifestation, so as to recreate it for the purposes of an autobiographical discourse.

The past is recaptured through the consciousness of the present, as one of its constituent parts, while it is the *cono d'ombra* (the cone of shadow, or of light) projected by the present that allows for its manifestations and epiphanies. In the 1905 *Notebook* entries James had written of the 'heavy bag of remembrance' in which to plunge deep and far, but where one could meet 'the ineffable ... cold Medusa-like face of life, of all the life *lived*', and

had given vent to a sense of joy mixed with misgivings, There he had recognized the discontinuity of the process of remembering, the fleeting, at times tormenting nature of his material. *Basta, basta* was his final invocation.¹⁰

In *A Small Boy and Others* the past is pursued and recaptured through a single procedure: letting oneself go with the flow of images, impressions and experiences in the past—a 'letting go' that James had resisted throughout his life and artistic career, though with some occasional lapses in wishing the contrary.¹¹ The 'letting go' is at first a partial or temporary renunciation of 'composition'—that composition that he had cherished and pursued as the chief aim of all his works—and a surrender to the flow or multiplication of aspects, to the 'swarm' of impressions and recollections that crowd the mind and the scene. Pursuing and following memories and associations is the primary structure of the book, also because, as we know, James dictated his text to the typist as a *continuum*. This succession and overlapping of images, aspects, recollections, constitutes the material and the texture of his autobiographical act. To sort them out or to catalogue critically would be to go against the very essence of the mnemonic, narrative, and literary procedure that he finally adopted with such a sense of final relief, despite his previous misgivings.

Yet some tentative disentangling may prove useful (especially in view of my concluding remarks), such as a primary distinction to be made between what has to do with the small boy and what pertains to the 'others', though one must keep in mind that the two really intersect, converge and overlap a great deal.

The small boy is caught and presented (sometimes even in the third person, as if he were some 'other') as always 'open' to experiences and receptive as a sponge: from the beginning he indulges in *flâneries*, hanging back, dawdling, dodging, gaping; everything is a spectacle to him. Yet from the beginning his basic activity is to 'take in', absorb, assimilate, and understand (according to the very first meaning of the term), but also to take in, in the sense of internalize, 'incorporate' and digest. It is a process of surrender to exterior suggestions which becomes a form of inner absorption, of appropriation and possession, both of his world and

the conscience of 'others', of seizing power, as a necessary postulate for his process of growth. Revisiting the past is a form of conquest, of appropriation, not only by memory but by the voracious and imperious self: he converts to his own uses unintended things.¹² In either sense, the process is dynamic, strongly motivated, on a system of relations that are instead weak, dangling, loose: the *free* flow of images, the *flâneries*, his dawdling and gaping, his standing aside or hanging back.

The small boy's relations with his relatives are equally open and loose: family relations offer a wide network, but a psychological disconnection obtains within. He is a *hotel* child, with no real home: the house in Albany is for vacations, those in New York are transient abodes, in a suspended condition. One school follows another, but the boy lives for and by himself: there is no real commitment or obligation. Getting to Europe is in order to 'get such a better sensuous education than they are likely to get here' (as Henry James, Sr., had written in a letter to R. W. Emerson, which Henry, Jr., slightly emends in the book: 'such a sensuous education as they can't get here'). No one in the family, as we saw, has anything to do with business. There is no political sense until the Civil War, the public scene is a blank; the social void of New York itself, when New York was no more than a village, allows for freedom and romance: James speaks of 'felicities of destitution'. It is a past with strangely Arcadian and ambiguously Edenic connotations; according to a stereotype of the American tradition, it leads to introspection, to the revel of the visiting mind. Broadway appears as an alley of Eden, the 'vacant lot' north of the town remains so through the years, goats and pigs show up round the corner.

The very resources of a still young American world appear loose and disconnected in that context, contemplation and observation take the place of active life. Cut off from activity and direct participation, the small boy is led to imagining, to the 'free play of the mind', to 'assimilations small and fine', to a 'fostered imagination'. He lives introspectively, within himself, that is, despite the immense freedom he enjoys. James himself marvels at the few points in which he seems to have touched constituted

reality, which in recollection takes on dusty or hazy colorations. His pre-ordained and predictable detachment determines, then and now, an 'inward perversity' that turns to its own use purposeless and vain things. Thus a subtly indirect, purely individual, and, as we shall see in a moment, artistic vision predominates: actuality is 'transformed' or 'converted' by the inner life.

This is indeed the vision that prepares for the Jamesian artist, for the exercise of sensibility and artistic expression, ultimately of writing. *A Small Boy and Others* becomes the narration of a self that predisposes itself to artistic endeavor: but this is where the *outer* swarm of images and impressions, the spectacle of the world, actuality, the 'others', who surround and condition the individual, become of paramount importance. The mind of the child is the pivot for absorbing and revealing history and society, objects, places, and people: hence the sprouting, indeed the breakthrough, of the artist.

4

For the small boy, relatives are the first manifestations of the world: different ethnic genealogies, definite but rather confused relations, a sense of belonging but also of instability and uncertainty—early deaths, broken lives, unfulfilled promises: 'we wholesomely breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions' (p. 124). Old New York appears as a village in the wilderness—at once bucolic and squalid: this is why, perhaps, James maintains that 'To look back at all is to meet the apparitional and to find in its ghostly face the silent stare of an appeal. When I fix it, the hovering shade, whether of person or place, it fixes me back and seems the less lost' (p. 54). He is rescuing the past in which people and places are waiting to be 'less lost': New York is still an eighteenth-century town, Broadway, Washington Square, 14th Street, are both a peaceful neighborhood and a confusion of coaches, a homely ground and the sparkling theater of the world. James proves a writer of New York, not New England. For once, we have him adhering almost passionately to his American past thanks to a kind of Proustian way of remembering: a sound or a smell, an image or

an impression, release the flow of recollections—and, as with Proust, we only have to read and re-live them with him.

In New York the small boy has the first glimpse of 'art'—Shakespeare and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, artificer and artifact,—and indirectly of history: the revolution in Paris, the Mexican War, fugitives slaves. Art, however, is in popular theaters, illustrated books (both classic and contemporary); in imposing living figures, such as Emerson, Poe, Irving—Dickens, above all, as a primary impression, that might have led, later on, to an anxiety of influence.¹³ From writers, illustrators, and painters (an endless string of them appears in the book), young Henry got his precious and precocious 'sense of Europe', first experienced through intermediaries from abroad—Punch, actors, governesses, even the mountebanks—and then directly on the European soil itself.

History and Art gradually become two final goals and climaxes: the outbreak of the Civil War is evoked towards the end of the book, while the discovery of (indeed, the 'passage to') Style is enacted at the Paris Louvre. For Art, the most meaningful interference—possibly emphasized by the narrating 'I', by elderly James deeply rooted as he was by then in England—is represented and provided precisely by the sense and the attraction of Europe. A great deal of the inner dynamics of *A Small Boy and Others* seems to lie in the dialectical tension between the adhesion to the lost world of early America (rescued and recovered through memory), and the birth *in it* of the desire for Europe.

That from the very beginning James contrasts the American 'natural' state with the 'formal' state of Europe, that he finds the smell of London in books and the odor of Italy in the pictures he is shown, that he drinks the venom of Europe in the names themselves, and sees his detached condition at home as a push to expatriation, may be construed as a reflection of later (1911-13) convictions on early indecisions. James's apprehension of Paris from the hotel balcony seems modeled on Lambert Strether's in *The Ambassadors*; and it has been noted that the *romance of travel* which is so present in *A Small Boy and Others* contrasts markedly with the feelings of dissatisfaction and unease, even partial refusal, that are found in his letters home during his early travels. Yet the

recollections of New York broaden in the book to include the first leanings towards Europe, where the 'draughts of the wine of perception' seem more generous, in retrospect, and where the bridges seem to lead to more things than at home. (Incidentally, a curious aspect is that France, Switzerland, England, are presented as essentially rural in the book, still leading a pastoral life, as in the forest of Arden, whereas New York, despite its primitive conditions, retains more urban characteristics.)

In this embryo of an international contrast, aesthetic evolution finds its completion in the pictures and in *Style*, where the previously detached perceptions, or rather glimpses, of Art coalesce.¹⁴ From the beginning the small boy has been interested in the 'scene', the 'drama', the 'picture': these are the great metaphors of James's later artistic and fictional renderings. In the theaters (and at home) young Henry has learned that life can be 'made' or 'produced': even in popular books, pictures, and plays he has plucked those 'artistic gems' which would bear fruit when the protagonist makes his leap towards style and art. Retrospectively, this leap is taken abroad and in the very Temple of Art, in the Galerie d'Apollon at the Louvre, which provides the crucial and conclusive adventure of the book.

The episode has been profusely discussed and commented upon, especially by biographers and Jamesian critics of the 1990s. In his later life—probably around 1910, according to Leon Edel's reconstruction—James had experienced a dream adventure, a nightmarish experience or 'immense hallucination' directly connected with the Galerie d'Apollon, which he chose to insert in a crucial position towards the end of *A Small Boy and Others*, with a dramatic rupture of temporal levels; and yet, the experience is blended into the narrative as if taking place simultaneously with childhood memories. In this episode, he frightens, scares, defeats, and puts to flight a spectral apparition which tried to frighten him, and which he not only keeps at bay, but routs—turning the tables, as it were, on a ghost which retreats into the dreamy perspective of the Galerie. It is a clear example of mixing what happened after with what went before, of an insertion of the future into the past (a procedure not at all unusual in autobiographies).¹⁵

Many interpretations have been suggested: a fundamental one, in my view, given the setting and the connections, and James's choice to insert the episode at this point, is certainly the artist's victory over the figures besetting his imagination, crowding his soul, haunting his mind. James, that is, chooses to seal the destiny of the small boy under the form of a nightmare and a hallucination wittingly overcome. The discovery of the world surrounding him, of art and history (the outbreak of the Civil War is placed very close to this episode), gives way to the willful self-assertion of a budding artist who triumphs over the anxiety of a spectral world, which for the rest of his life would be his doom and his challenge.

In the final chapter, *A Small Boy and Others* closes on an illness and a loss of conscience in Boulogne, the news of a financial crisis in the U. S., and the assault of the local and social aspects of Europe, of her aesthetic, historical, and cultural fullness, of her abundance of signs and signification. Everything here represents more than it appears; the Victorian presences betray a crucial *combination* of history, literature, and society: it is a global situation and a complexity that the small boy and prospective artist has to confront. Once the ghosts of the mind have been defeated, a new challenge looms large: the artist will have to exercise all his power and his control over a baffling but *constituted* world.

5

Some further considerations are in order here. Despite James's initial, and indeed protracted, 'letting go', his surrender to the flow of images, impressions, and recollections, they were held together by the golden thread of the youthful education of a prospective artist. And towards the end of the book, James begins to 'compose' his narration in such a way as to discountenance the 'letting go', the 'no plotted thing at all', and to set into relief the pivotal moment of his 'education': his passage to Europe, his separation from his family, the struggle with the nightmare that represents the price to be paid for any artistic achievement.

Both in the text and extra-textually, James reveals that he is

aware of the 'visionary liberties' he constantly took both with chronology, and by omitting, transposing, and conflating episodes: 'I couldn't do without the *scene*', he writes (p. 434; or, as he put it in an essay, 'the picture was after all in essence one's aim'). Elsewhere he was to speak of strategies of compensation and transposition; in *Notes of a Son and Brother* he would take liberties with the very text of his brother's (and father's) letters, and with some facts; in *The Middle Years* he admitted 'sincerities of emphasis and "composition"; perversities, idiosyncrasies, incalculabilities' (p. 558). The free-flowing memories were *shaped* by an autonomous force and an artistic will; they were subjected to a dramatizing, creative process.¹⁶

When dealing with creativity in an autobiographical work, James applies a creative impulse to it. The relation, the interplay, and the constant interaction, between the flow of memories and artistic composition is a constituting element of James's autobiography, both in its material and its form. This entails a tension and a strain, that are typical of autobiographical works, but which in James's specific case acquire at times (as we have seen before) a 'ghostly', 'apparitional' tone. Despite the sweetness of memories and the distance of age, a relation with the past opens strained and estranged perspectives. To conjoin past and present, self and outer reality, memory and desire, involves risks: as in Proust, time recaptured can turn into a *danse macabre*. If this does not happen in James, it is because the authority of artistic control that was adumbrated in the Galerie d'Apollon, and achieved through decades of rigorous application, allows for that fusion of observer and observed reality, free-flowing images and compositional aim, the wide-open doors of memory and the closing circle of recollections, without which James would not be James, and his autobiography would not be an autobiography.

The bridge spanning the abyss of the past (which was evoked at the outset) is as it were suspended in the void: looking at America 'as Europe would do' (James's own admission) involves some risks. Around those years James gave at least two narrative proofs of the spectral nature of one's encounter with, or recourse to, the past: "The Jolly Corner", his 'ghost story' of 1908, in which the expatriate protagonist meets the *alter ego* he might have

become had he stayed at home—and it is a nightmarish apparition; and the unfinished novel *The Sense of the Past*, where the protagonist's longed-for plunge into the past acquires hallucinatory and nightmarish connotations of constriction, imprisonment, and a desperate wish to escape from it. Looking backwards can turn people into statues of salt; what can be discovered in the past may have the effect of a Medusa-like face.¹⁷

This particular aspect is just touched upon in *A Small Boy and Others*, where James's typical pilgrimage, personal as well as fictional, is reversed, in that he 'intrudes' into an American past from an English present (not viceversa), and his quest is not so much for 'what might have been'—as is the case of the two texts just cited—, but rather for what was and had to be. 'With the passage of time America had taken on for him the romantic "otherness" once possessed by Europe', F. O. Matthiessen observed; in his own book, James finds and declares himself 'furiously American', while quite a few letters of this period ring the same note. As for 'what might have been', by its very nature the autobiographical act directs or subordinates it to the conditions achieved in the present.¹⁸

With all his gaps and unbalances, in the very discontinuity of memory and evocation, aware as he is that going back into the past is a sort of tight-rope walking, over two spans of time and two worlds, James escapes the terror of the abyss and the Other, precisely because he balances self-narration with the spectacle of outer reality, present vision and former sights, indirect and direct perception, the Palace of Art where he has landed and the House of Life he revisits. This may be taken to represent another aspect of that double exposure in which outward life resolves itself into inward life, and viceversa.

As for the 'composition' question: in the two volumes that were to follow—*Notes of a Son and Brother* and *The Middle Years*, which trace other stages in the education of a young artist, but in a less unified way, because of William entering the scene and the encumbrance of letters, papers, documentary or reflexive parts, that were absent in the first volume—James gives sufficient indications to this effect. Fairly extensive quotations are in order here.

At Harvard he discovers that 'What I "wanted to want" to be was, all intimately, just *literary*' (p. 413). He admits that it was a question of testing his capacity to register and represent, for the purposes of the 'personal history, as it were, of an imagination', in which the play of the strong imaginative passion was the center of interest. 'Fed by every contact and every apprehension, and feeding in turn every motion and every act', James's fanciful protagonist or hero could indeed appear as someone else: 'He had been with me all the while, and only too obscurely and intimately—I had not found him in the market as an exhibited or *offered* value. I had in a word to draw him forth from within rather than meet him in the world before me, the more convenient sphere of the objective, and to make him objective, in short, had to turn nothing less than myself inside out' (pp. 454-55). He reveals himself a man of imagination at the highest pitch, endowed with a divining frenzy. 'Seeing further into the figurable world *made* company of persons and places, objects and subjects alike: it gave them all without exception chances to be somehow or other interesting' (p. 492).

'These secrets of the imaginative life', James writes further on, 'were in fact more various than I may dream of trying to tell; they referred to actual concretions of existence as well as to the supposititious; the joy of life indeed, drawbacks and all, was just in the constant quick flick of associations, to and fro, and through a hundred open doors, between the two great chambers (if it be not absurd, or even base, to separate them) of direct and indirect experience' (p. 494). In *The Middle Years* he postulated that 'there were clearly a thousand contacts and sensations, of the strong direct order, that one lost by not so living; exquisitely because of the equal number of immunities and independencies, blest liberties of range for the intellectual adventure, that accrued by the same stroke' (p. 563). Involved in picturing and composition, in reflections, conclusions, comparisons, that man of imagination, indeed that artist, is made to enjoy an intensity that could give the illusion of the *other intensity*—the intensity of active life—, while the reverse was not true for those immersed in actual life.

Thus the meaning and the terms of that *fusion* (the word is used and underlined by James) become clear. Consistently with his whole life and confirmed artistic procedure, it is indirect vision, the reflected images of life, perception and consciousness, that by confronting time and reality, objects and the world, the self and others, make them referable, representable, and usable.

Towards the conclusion of *Notes of a Son and Brother*, James asked himself if the reader could not 'accuse [him] of treating an inch of canvas to an acre of embroidery', and his answer was: 'Let the poor canvas figure time and the embroidery figure consciousness—the proportion will perhaps then not strike us as so wrong' (p. 521). It is consciousness that diffuses time and unravels the thread of memory, that generates and legitimates the very substance of the embroidery. If one looks closely, time has been reduced to 'an inch of canvas' because it is the embroidery—i.e. inward consciousness—that allows for this fusion of self and world, subject and object, the small boy whose steps have been retraced and the American (or European) scene that witnessed and brought them about.

In this sense, as we saw at the beginning, the act of writing allows James to lay his ghost at rest (this is the very phrase he uses for his cousin Minnie Temple, whose death marks the end of his youth); it may have reconciled him with the present, and restored his artistic ability. If it is true that time recaptured coincides with the glimmerings and the first assertion of an artistic vocation, the Autobiography as such re-affirms the excellence that has been achieved. That James considered *A Small Boy and Others* 'the most impudent volume that ever saw the light', and regarded it as 'locked fast in the golden cage of the *intraduisible*',¹⁹ should not surprise us. The book is unorthodox, as was noted, in the audacity of its self-representation and its construction of an identity that blurs the boundaries with the Other. But it is neither impudent nor *intraduisible*, I believe, precisely because it is the result of a continuous series of linguistic 'conversions', transpositions, and *translations*: far from being the transcript of a rounded-off self, it remains fluid and dynamic in its representations.

Not the least of its 'fluidities' is that the self is seen and presented not only *in* the world, but *at work*, caught in the act (as James repeatedly wrote), as a character to be evoked and pursued until he is acknowledged for what he has become. In this sense, we might say with Rimbaud, *je est un autre*, until it is recognized as the "I" of an artist. Once this is attained, we come full circle, and the autobiographical act is achieved. As Michael Sprinker rightly remarked, 'The origin and the end of autobiography converge in the very act of writing, as Proust brilliantly demonstrates at the end of *Le temps retrouvé*, for no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subjective self, and author, collapse into the act of producing a text.'²⁰

6

In an almost psychotic reaction to James's autobiographical volumes, an old-time friend and admirer, Henry Adams—who had in turn written an 'objectified', intellectual autobiography in the third person, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1908), which proved however the record of his failed education—accused him of having succumbed to the nostalgia of a limited, lost world. Having freed himself of the past by writing it into an imaginative evocation, James had an easy task in rejoining, in a well-known letter, that it was the latent or recovered pull of the artist that had sustained him: '*Of course* we are lone survivors, of course the past that was our lives is at the bottom of an abyss—if the abyss *has* any bottom; of course too there is no use talking unless one particularly *wants* to. But the purpose, almost, of my printed divagations was to show you that one *can*, strange to say, still want to.... I still find my consciousness interesting—under *cultivation* of the interest.... You see I still, in presence of life (or of what you deny to be such), have reactions—as many as possible—and the book I sent you is a proof of them.'

And he added, in an unforgettable sentence: 'It's, I suppose, because I am that queer monster the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility. Hence the reactions—appearances, memories, many things go on playing upon it with consequences

that I note and "enjoy" (grim word!) noting. It all takes doing—and I *do*. I believe I shall do yet again—it is still an act of life.²¹

A *Small Boy and Others* bears witness to the birth, growth, and persistence, of that 'queer monster, the artist', to the stubborn finality and the 'act of life' to which he is irrevocably committed.

¹ "I feel that at such rate I remember too much"; "I lose myself, of a truth, under the whole pressure of the spring of memory", *Henry James's Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee, London, Allen, New York, Criterion Books, 1956, pp. 54, 131 (henceforth page references in the text). See also James's letter to his nephew: "I get on, distinctly, with my work—the only trouble is that the whole retrospect & all my material come to me, flow vividly in, in *too great* abundance [...] the only thing is to *let* everything, even *make* everything, come & flow, let my whole consciousness & memory play in the past as it will", 23-26 December 1911, quoted in Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts. Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 92.

² W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, London, Macmillan, 1966, p. 55 (page references henceforth in the text).

³ *Du côté de chez Swann* was published in 1914 : James may have known it, Yeats certainly did. An article in the *TLS* of December 4, 1914, compared it with *A Small Boy and Others* (see Adeleine Tintner, "Autobiography is Fiction: The 'Usurping Consciousness' as Hero in James's Memoirs", in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 23 (1977), pp. 239-60, p. 252 in particular, who examines some possible analogies). In order to find a nineteenth-century prototype of a discontinuous, desultory, 'jumping' autobiography, one may resort to De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822 edition), in particular to the 'Preliminary Confessions' of Part I. In De Quincey, however, the upsurge and the superimposition of memoirs and sensations, are not so much due to literary, psychological or existential motivations, as to the mental derèglement of the senses and the mind induced by laudanum. The distinction is of paramount importance, although Georges Poulet (*Mesure de l'instant*, quoted in Alide Cagidemetrio, *Fictions of the Past*, Amherst, Massachusetts U. P., 1992, p. 80) remarks that it was De Quincey's romantic sensibility that fostered new concepts of a time totality in simultaneous experience of past memories and present perceptions.—Roy Pascal, too, in his *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Cambridge, Harvard U. P. 1960, had dealt with some parallelisms between James's *A Small Boy and Others* and Yeats's *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*.

⁴ We may note here that De Quincey's *Confessions*, too, end in a generalized loss of consciousness, in his abandoning himself to the startling, upward and downward spirals, and in a torpor of the mind. A characteristic shared by these Autobiographies (including their prototype, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, which aimed to retrace 'the growth of a poet's mind') is a continuous

redrafting and re-elaboration of the material, their textual, compositional, and to some extent mental or psychological, instability.

⁵ See Theodora Bosanquet, *Henry James at Work*, The Hogarth Essays, 1924, rpt. Freeport, NY, Books for Libraries, 1970, pp. 251-52; Millgate, pp. 92-3 (also for what follows). Millgate and Carol Holly, *Intensely Family. The Inheritance of Family Shame and the Autobiographies of Henry James*, Madison, Wisconsin U. P., 1995, emphasize James's poor mental and physical conditions while writing them.

⁶ *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, New York, Scribner's, 1920, 2 vols., II, pp. 346-47. It is noteworthy that Lubbock presented James's letters from 1869, the year when his Autobiography came to an end.

⁷ For more details and more statements to this effect, see Holly, pp. 90-93, and, for what follows, Millgate, pp. 76-77, in particular.

⁸ *The Complete Notebooks*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers, New York, Oxford U. P., 1987, p. 237, and p. 242; Millgate, pp. 89-90. See also Daniel Stempel, 'Biography as Dramatic Monologue: Henry James, W. W. Story, and the Alternative Vision', *New England Quarterly*, 62 (1989), pp. 224-47; William Hoffa, 'The Final Preface: Henry James's Autobiography', *Sewanee Review*, 77 (1969), pp. 277-93.

⁹ See Cagidemetrio, p. 182: the solution of an upsetting past is in remembering, 'since remembering both frees individuals, and connects them to the past'. See also Ross Posnock, *Trial of Curiosity. Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*, New York, Oxford U. P., 1991, ch. 7 ('James foregrounds both the "strain of holding the I together", and the suspension of that obligation', p. 185).

¹⁰ *Complete Notebooks*, pp. 237-40. This aspect—reinforced by the sense of freedom and detachment enjoyed by the protagonist (see below)—is what radically distinguishes *A Small Boy and Others* from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: a text one could be tempted to pair off with Henry James's text, but which is motivated and sustained by an absolute finality and ultimate direction (with the only possible exception of the very beginning). Joyce's discourse develops through a series of rigorous and well-defined psychological, existential, and above all *intellectual* acquisitions. To his first biographer he had described the early draft of the book, *Stephen Hero*, as 'an autobiographical book, a personal history, as it were, of the growth of a mind, his own mind' (Herbert Gorman, *James Joyce*, London, John Lane, the Bodley Head, 1941, p. 133); according to his brother Stanislaus, he had thought of his character as developing 'from an embryo', as a process of gestation—the gestation of a soul from foetal to full organism (see Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, London, Oxford U.P., 1966, p. 307).

¹¹ See, for instance, his *Notebook* entry for July 13, 1981: 'The upshot of all such reflections is that I have only to let myself *go!* So I have said to myself all my life....Yet I have never fully done it....it seems the formula of my salvation, of what remains to me of a future....The way to do it—to affirm one's self *sur la fin*...Go on, my boy, and strike hard; have a long and rich St. Martin's Summer' (etc.: *Complete Notebooks*, pp. 57-58).

¹² 'All but inexpressible—he writes—the part played, in the young mind naturally even though perversely, even though inordinately, arranged as a stage for the procession and exhibition of appearances, by matters all of a usual cast, contacts and impressions not arriving at the dignity of shocks, but happening to be to the taste, as one may say, of the little intelligence, happening to be such as the fond fancy could assimilate' (p. 105).

¹³ See also *Complete Notebooks*, p. 238, where in 1905 James writes of the *emotion* left with him by Dickens and of '*l'imitation première* (the divine, the unique)' 'in the ghostly old C[ambridge]' of 1864-65. Yet in the same year he published a rather critical review of *Our Mutual Friend*, which put Dickens at a safe distance.—Other writers whose presence became meaningful for him at that time were Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thackeray, George Sand and George Eliot.

¹⁴ Here is the Passage to Style: 'It was as if they [the pictures] had gathered there into a vast deafening chorus; I shall never forget how...they filled those vast halls with the influence rather of some complicated sound, diffused and reverberant, than of such visibilities as one could directly deal with.... They only arched over us in the wonder of their endless golden riot and relief, figured and flourished in perpetual revolution, breaking into great high-hung circles and symmetries of squandered picture....This comes to saying that in those beginnings I felt myself most happily cross that bridge over to Style constituted by the wondrous Galerie d'Apollon' (pp. 195-96). The whole experience has an uncanny connotation in itself, even regardless of the spectral apparition (see below).

¹⁵ However, James had related a similar dream/nightmare experienced in his youth to Ottoline Morrell, in which he had also defied, pursued, and frightened away a monster at the far end of a 'gallery': see *Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell*, ed. Robert Gathorne-Hardy, New York, Knopf, 1964, pp. 139-40, and Holly, pp. 47-48 and passim, for a discussion of the two episodes; Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Untried Years*, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1963, pp. 74-80, interprets the experience as Henry's fighting the overhanging 'ghost' of his brother William.

¹⁶ On the 'compositional' character of the narration, the distortions of people, the liberties taken with chronology, the significant transposition or conflation of episodes, see in particular Paul John Eakin, 'Henry James and the Autobiographical Act', in *Prospects*, 8 (1983), pp. 211-60, rpt. in his *Fictions in Autobiography*, Princeton, Princeton U. P., 1985, pp. 56-125, and Donna Przybylowicz, *Desire and Repression. The Dialectic of Self and Other in the Late Works of Henry James*, University, AL, Alabama U. P., 1986 (in her view, James's discourse is more important than his history, and qualifies itself as fictitious narrative: 'autobiographical works examine the act of perception, the functioning of a mind deconstructing, modifying and re-creating new realms of being that are detached from palpable reality; here the narrator's and the character's voices blend indistinguishably', p. 302). Eakin quotes a letter by James to T. S. Perry where he admits: 'I kind of need, for my small context, that July 1st '63 should have been a Sunday', and that he always thought of the 'Gettysburg Sunday', i. e. that the battle took place on a

Sunday; 'What really happened', he maintains, is what the self perceived (p. 251).

¹⁷ On this topic, see, among others, Cushing Strout, 'Henry James's Dream of the Louvre, "The Jolly Corner", and Psychological Interpretation', *Psychohistory Review*, 8, (1979), pp. 47-52.

¹⁸ *The James Family. A Group Biography*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen, New York, Knopf, 1947, p. 308, and in the Autobiography: 'Thus there dawned upon me the grand possibility that, charm for charm, the American, the assumed, the postulated, would, in the particular case of its really acting, count double; whereas the European paid for being less precarious by being also less miraculous' (p. 453).—'What might have been' and what has been 'point to one end / Which is always present', T. S. Eliot postulated in *Four Quartets*, and it might well apply to *A Small Boy and Others*; but then, 'If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable'.

¹⁹ See James's letter to Henry Adams, 26 May 1913, *The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams, 1877-1914*, ed. George Monteiro, Baton Rouge, Louisiana U. P., 1992, p. 85, and Robert F. Sayre, *The Examined Self. B. Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James*, Princeton, Princeton U. P., 1964, p. 190.

²⁰ Michael Sprinker, 'The End of Autobiography', in *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney, Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1972, p. 342.

²¹ Henry Adams's letter to James is not extant, but can be reconstructed from his reaction; we know that to Mrs. Cameron he had written: 'Poor Henry James thinks it all real and actually still lives in that dreary, stuffy Newport and Cambridge with papa James and Charles Eliot Norton'. See *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, Cambridge, Harvard U. P., 1974-84, 4 vols., IV, pp. 705-06 and *The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams*, cit., pp. 88-89. For further Bibliographical indications, I refer to the Introduction to my Italian edition of James's book, *Un bambino e gli altri*, tr. Giuliana Schiavi, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 1993, pp. xxxvi-xli, and to later contributions cited in the previous Notes. This essay was completed at the Remarque Institute, New York University, November-December 2000: I am grateful for their hospitality.