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HENRY JAMES'S ENIGMAS

Turning the Screw of Eternity?



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INTRODUCTION

Towards Westminster Abbey: the Twin's Mythical Eternity

Inscribed at the threshold of several cultures, James' literary work continues to be provocative today, as much by the suggestion of a hidden design, concealed from the reader's view, as by the successive interpretations to which it has given rise. If we consider the writer to be one of the finest critics of his time, as illustrated in the collection of his 1907-1909 edition of Prefaces grouped under the title *The Art of the Novel* and the thousands of pages of articles he penned on the great European and American novelists or places, then the proliferation of these studies that Henry James foresaw and even anticipated should come as no surprise. His stories abound with the figures of successful artists and writers who shroud themselves in the mystery of their creation or who rouse "a monstrous and morbid curiosity" and an uncontrollable "interpretative heat," as James wrote about William Shakespeare in his 1907 preface on *The Tempest*.¹ Thus the progressive development of a successful writer with his mysterious personal sensibility grounded in a particular vision of the Western world will constitute the main focus of this study.

Our search will take us first in the direction of Henry James' landscapes; we shall explore his cult of the *genius loci* and his visions of castles and towns of the Western world. A passion of archaeology and of the "ruins" of the ancient world in Rome did bring him to share with Sigmund Freud an interest in the work of the German archaeologist Henrich Schliemann and to be the first to explore, even indirectly, the unconscious of his characters in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880), thus unwittingly processing an original novelistic "analytical cure." This proximity to Freud will also be a productive interpretive tool in the case of Leonardo da Vinci. We will see how, exploring the past of the painter with the help of Walter Pater, James produced a brilliant analysis of perversion and of the "cases" of contemporary artists. We will not be confined to such a psychological and cultural approach, but we will also take into account Thorsten Veblen's anthropological research. The latter provided James with an appreciation of the changes of civilization and of the growing materialism of the period

¹ Henry James, *Selected Literary Criticism*, Ed. Morris Shapira, Prefaced with a Note by F.R. Leavis (London: William Heinemann, 1963), 353.

as portrayed through a questioning of Balzac's realism. Concurrently, the analysis of the hereditary family and the mutation of psychology best promoted by his brother William James, the "pragmatist" philosopher and great psychologist of his times, will introduce us to Henry James's portrait gallery and to the affective conditions which directed his most outstanding tales. In our study of the associations linking the cosmopolite traveller's changing scenery to the analysis of society's workings, we will see the effects of a culturalist attitude and a cult of "the fatal "Historic Sense." This attitude, as a last resort, was the result of a founding "turn of the screw" self-inflicted by the young bachelor in 1880² and called for his moralist's judgement and participation as the heir of both the Enlightenment and of the fathers of American democracy. Charles Fourier, Sacher-Masoch, introduced to James by Madame Thérèse Bentzon and Oscar Wilde will join us in this adventure through the cult of "passionate attractions," and sometimes into "a comedy of humours," in which voyeurism and perverse jubilation preside over the penetration of the *sanctum* of the Victorian family.

Significantly, we will be concerned by the fate of the child in its nursery and by the introduction of a future for the "heir of all the ages." In his "research in the lines of human progress" patronised by Lewis. H. Morgan's *Ancient Society*, James would raise the question of the "fetishism" of the child, a substitute for "primitive" Victorian necrophiliacs associated with the androgyny of spectres. This survey will be concluded by a close examination of the psychopathology of diet and of the nervous collapses of the novelist himself. Focussing on a society threatened by the myth of the degeneration of the species, our search will lead us to wonder how an expatriate, "amiable bachelor" engaged in the "cause of civilization," but obsessed by the fear of his own "degenerescence" illness,³ was able to probe so deeply into the soul of his contemporaries and to coin the most sophisticated style that led to his current status as one of the great psychological novelists. Théophile Gautier, George Sand, Flaubert and other French and English novelists will direct us through the maze of James's literary workshop and show the complex elaboration of his fictions and plots, in which borrowing immediately means appropriation and transformation. The

² See Chapter 7, note 59.

³ "... an amiable bachelor here and there doesn't strike me amiss and I think he too may look forward to the cause of civilization." Letter to Miss Grace Norton, November 7, 1880 in Leon Edel, Ed., *Henry James Letters* (1875-1883) Vol. IV (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1975) 314. "This degenerescence of mine" Henry James, Letter to his father, October 26, 1869, Leon Edel, Ed., *Henry James Letters* (1843-1875) Vol. III (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1974) 156-157.

cult of painting, evident in *Picture and Text* (1893) linked to a passion for caricature cultivated with his friend George Du Maurier and apparent through his admiration for Honoré Daumier will lead us to an inquiry into the clever inventions brought about through an original transformation of Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*. Here, the figure of an unexpected XVIIIth century caricaturist will emerge, showing both the high degree of James's cultural bend and variety in the disguise of his sources of inspiration. Consequently *The Turn of the Screw* will stand at the heart of our investigation, grounded as it is in our previously discovered source: *Misunderstood*, a novel by Florence Montgomery, the aristocrat from Cadogan Place.⁴ Our investigation will mainly deal with the myth that commanded James's whole life: the myth of the Twins inspired by his relationship with William, the "Ideal Elder Brother" mentioned in his letter to Thomas Sergeant Perry in 1910,⁵ a myth supported by the famous research of Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. It was through the literary wielding of this myth that James, under the regular chiming of the Saint Mary Church bells in the little town of Rye, East Sussex, partly wrote or dictated the best novels of his "Major Phase." With its cobbled streets, its old wooden-beamed inns and its medieval ramparts, Rye was outstanding: its XIVth century church tower has a remarkable clock containing one of the oldest mechanisms in the country. Above its blue face from where its hands and golden numerals stand out, with a solar shine, there is an inscription, also in golden manuscript, which captivates any passer by looking up: framed by two "quarter boys," sorts of chubby-cheeked baroque cherubs in resplendent gold, it consists of a reference to the Scriptures: "For our time is a very shadow that passeth away" (*The Book of Wisdom* 2: 5). A merciless tyranny of time brandished for the view of the faithful by two innocent creatures! Might the display of this admonishment to avoid temporalities have reminded the novelist of the sense of urgency he faced with the passage of Time? Might James have been inspired to gather all his energy for full, ultimate recognition of "the younger brother" and "the man of Letters" that he was, as he had been involved from adolescence in endless rivalry with his brother William, a man of science and medicine? Similarly, Gustave Flaubert, whom he admired, had competed with his brother Achille, an element of their raging "family homeostasis," as I have shown in my essay "Homéostasie et dégénérescence de la famille

⁴ See our article: Perrot, Jean. "Henry James Gambling on Ghosts: 'The 'Private Source' of *The Turn of the Screw*'" in Tredy, Dennis, Duperray, Annick, Harding, Adrian dir. *Henry James and the Poetics of Duplicity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013) 3-19.

⁵ *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 Vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920) Vol. II, 167.

héréditaire.”⁶ Reading Henry James then, one has the feeling that, caught between the contemporary flow of time (Time 1) and his own ceaseless intellectual moves from the present to the past and from the past to the future (Time 2), he would have shared, had he known it, the concept of “the unreality of time” discussed by the Cambridge philosopher J.M.E. McTaggart in his 1908 article,⁷ and wished to escape this contradiction to win some part of eternity.

Facing the rising influence of *fin-de-siècle* ghosts, laying aside the “kicking fiend”⁸ of illness and with a view to the future in his “Ivory Tower,” James who all his life had kept an extraordinary correspondence with his parents up to their death, with his brother and with so many friends from different countries, then devoted his attention to his last unfinished literary creations, “embroidering” for himself a name which would make him eternal in the Pantheon of English Letters. The young man who once enjoyed “the privilege of an afternoon nap beside Herbert Spencer”⁹ in his Athenaeum Club was much impressed by the aristocracy of Cadogan Place, as his novel *The Ambassadors* revealed. An admirer of “the Greatness of England,” he became a British Citizen in 1915 and in 1916 King George V awarded him the Order of Merit. In his autobiography, he would define his own conception of glory. His “art of the novel” would be realised as a splendid building, with windows, balconies, secret “coigns of vantage,”¹⁰ “fine embossed vaults and painted arches” and “a chequered pavement, the ground under the reader’s feet.”¹¹ Hiding his sources, the novelist was an adept of what he called “delightful dissimulation,” a method, which, as he recognized in the same passage, provided “refinements and ecstasies,” as “all art is expression, and is thereby vividness.”¹² Following his scorched earth policy, which led him to burn a fair number of his letters and personal documents, he erased some of the most obvious tracks he had made in his preparatory work, leaving us with the heritage of his mysterious “figure in the carpet.” Afflicted by “an obscure hurt” in his back, he finally staged a scenic victory over

⁶ Jean Perrot, “Homéostasie et dégénérescence de la famille héréditaire”, *La Thérapie familiale psychanalytique*. Eds. René Kaës and Didier Anzieu (Paris: Dunod, 1981) 180-201.

⁷ J.M.E. McTaggart, The unreality of Time, *Mind*, Vol. 17, 1908, 457-474.

⁸ “I do feel that I have definitely turned the corner and let the fiend down even though he still kicks as viciously as he can manage”, Letter to Miss Jessie Allen, February 20, 1910. *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 Vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920) Vol. II 158.

⁹ See Chapter 7, note 88.

¹⁰ H. James, *The Art of the Novel*, (1907, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962) 306.

¹¹ H. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 52.

¹² H. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 324.

neurosis and its negative forces under the gorgeous fight offered in *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) through a ciphered nightmare in the Louvre Apollo Gallery,¹³ there again, with the unsuspected help of another novel by Florence Montgomery... His unfinished autobiography, like *The Sense of the Past*, which he started writing in 1900 and resumed in 1914, would keep the secrets of his private life entire, crown the cryptic quality of his style and manner, and be left in a significant suspension of time... the wonderment riddle of any eager reader. Through his successive “turns of the screw” of craftsmanship, James would win a prestigious headstone in the Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey: there he lies between Lewis Carroll and John Hopkins on one axis and T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas on another. Lord Byron, George Eliot, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Anthony Trollope and D.H. Laurence are not far away, and they all rest under the protected shadow of Geoffrey Chaucer’s tomb.

¹³ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (London: Macmillan, 1913) 362-364.