

Henry James and "the New England Conscience"

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Sophisticated cosmopolitan as he was, and for all his detachment as an international bachelor, Henry James was preoccupied with what he defined in an 1895 entry of his *Notebooks* as "the New England conscience." Henry James the artist was a curious and attentive observer and analyst of life. Throughout his career James was engaged in defining or rather dramatizing this "New England conscience," which was at once alien and repulsive to his nature (he was not a New Englander by birth) but also, with whatever European enlightenments, an ineradicable part of his American heritage shared by his father and his brother William James. This short paper attempts to clarify the nature of "the New England conscience" and its relation to James's career as a novelist.

Since early in life James had been initiated into the cultures of the Old Continent. He was well acquainted with the English and French stages; spent much of his time in the National Gallery and in the Louvre, which experience cultivated in him a passion for various forms of visual arts. From this vantage point, this supersensitive man came to appreciate the richer and denser shades of cultures of the Old Continent. He lamented the lack of materials for a novelist in his native land and cherished a most intense longing to escape from what he found crude, base and shallow, into the antiquity, the culture and the spiritual freedom of Europe. Henry James was one of the many Americans who turned East for the values of life, which was not an unusual phenomenon among his well-to-do contemporaries.

So far James resembles many of his characters: Christopher Newman (*The American*), Adam Verver (*The Golden Bowl*) or Rowland Mallet (*Roderick Hudson*). Each of these characters.

turns East to crown, as it were, his material success of the so called "American Dream" with either a beautiful woman or art collections. Adam Verver wishes to endow his native place with a museum. Prince Amerigo, his son-in-law, is also a part of his collection, "the things that can only be got over [there]." He is "a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price."¹ Christopher Newman, whose sole aim in life is to make money, feels for all his business success a bitter sense of the precious thing wasted. He comes to Europe, seeking "the biggest entertainment a man can get. People, places, art, nature, everything!"² He wants to "see the tallest mountains, and the bluest lakes, and the finest pictures, and the handsome churches, and the most celebrated men, and the most elegant woman."³

Rowland Mallet is extremely fond of all the arts and has an almost passionate enjoyment of pictures. Like Adam Verver, he thinks that it is the work of a good citizen so privileged to go abroad and purchase certain valuable specimens of "the Dutch and Italian schools," and then present his treasures to an American city. Also he gives us the first glimpse into "a stiff Puritan stock" who are brought up "to think much more intently of the duties of our earthly pilgrimage than of its privileges and pleasures."⁴ What instigates him to patronize Roderick is nothing but his sense of obligation as a citizen (shall we say?) to society. And Rowland easily gives up a woman for whom he cherishes a tender affection for his protégé and his artistic genius which Rowland himself does not possess.

Henry James, however, goes further than any of these characters. As a result of his cosmopolitanism James was led to a skepticism about the ultimate validity of the *mores* of any one culture.⁵ He knew both cultures—American and European—too well to commit himself to one or the other. He rather sought a more comprehensive and freer clime where the two different values complement each other to create a deeper and richer compound. He dramatized the dichotomy of these two different

cultures; his novels are the records of his very search for an all-inclusive reality which is neither strictly American nor European.

Now what strikes us most about James's characters is their capacity for renunciation, for giving up any particular gratification in favor of some fine ideal of conduct which it proves incompatible.⁶ They invariably believe in "purity, duty and dignity."

In order to answer Madame de Mauves's high opinion of him, Longmore departs for America even if he feels something of infinite value is floating past him. He submits to the inevitable and does "the handsome thing." He deliberately condemns his future to be "the blank memory of a regret rather than the long possession of a treasure."⁷ What is Madame de Mauves's high opinion of her countryman? Euphemia appeals to him, "If this were to happen — if I were to find you selfish where I thought you generous, narrow where I thought you large, vulgar where I thought you rare, I should think worse of human nature."⁸ Longmore perceives in this unhappy woman a dim, overwhelming sense of invulnerable constancy. She has "nothing but a conscience, nothing but a dogged obstinate clinging conscience."⁹ Juxtaposed against this dogged conscience are the rapacity and unscrupulosity of the Baron and Madame Clairin, who sacrifice innocence to preserve what *they* consider a precious heritage — the propriety of their good-for-nothing house. They judge Euphemia to be "an odd compound" which they would not profess to understand. Hence it is to Longmore, her compatriot, that Euphemia appeals, as Longmore has "in his composition a lurking principle of asceticism to whose authority he [has] ever paid an unquestioning respect."¹⁰ What interested Henry James is the very tension life offers between the need "to submit to the inevitable" and the urge "to grasp unsparingly at happiness"¹¹ — the tension between "a still negation" and "the most passionate

self-surrender.”¹² “Madame de Mauves” elaborates the dialectic of these two sets of values, which ends up in a parallel line.

Christopher Newman craves the best of everything, yet ends up with nothing. His “most elegant woman” retires beyond his reach—beyond the walls of a Carmelite convent. He relinquishes a chance for revenge and burns up the letter which may have revealed the hideous crime of the Bellegards. Newman’s action is another example of “a still negation.” Newman is not a New Englander (his history is a Western success story), but he shares the scrupulosity of other characters.

Isabel Archer’s decision to return to Osmond and “to make life her business yet for a long time to come”¹³ is another manifestation of the same trait—“the sense of honor.” We know what a capacity for happiness is Isabel’s. “She [has] an immense curiosity about life and [is] constantly staring and wondering. She [carries] within herself a great fund of life, and her deepest enjoyment [is] to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world.”¹⁴ In spite of her aspirations Isabel chooses to embrace her fate, from which she doggedly thinks she cannot escape. And there is Lambert Strether who resolves to return to Woollett without any prospect of compensation. For all he has learned Strether refuses Maria’s proposal that he remain in Europe and *live* at last after “the waste of living” in Woollett, Mass. But more of this later.

This sense of loss, defeat, deprivation or self-effacement in James’s novels seems to have warded off many readers with the indictment that his novels are *thin*, devoid of any plausible tracts of life. A clue to the conducts of Jamesian characters may be found in “the New England conscience.” In the 1895 entry of his *Notebooks* James explains the character and background of his hero, Lambert Strether: “He has never really *enjoyed*, he has lived only *for Duty and conscience*—his conception of them; for pure appearances and daily tasks—lived for effort, for

surrender, abstention, sacrifice.”¹⁶

“Conscience” in its broadest sense means an “inner consciousness of right and wrong”; its function is always to convict us of sin. Now this particular conscience, “the New England conscience,” is derived from Puritanism. And it is not purely an American phenomenon; the English Puritans shared it in abundance. (Shakespeare anticipates their characteristic morbidity when he makes Sir Toby and his coterie ridicule Malvolio that “he is a kind of puritan”¹⁶ — “puritan” is not capitalized. In his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) Matthew Arnold uses the phrases — “strictness of conscience” and “spontaneity of consciousness” — to distinguish two influences of life — Hebraism and Hellenism. “The uppermost idea with Hebraism,” Arnold writes, “is conduct and obedience.”¹⁷ “An unclouded clearness of mind, an unimpeded play of thought, is what this bent (meaning Hellenism) drives at. The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*.”¹⁸ “The New England conscience” may as well be identified with this “strictness of conscience.”

“The New England conscience,” which suffers interiorly from conscience, must be distinguished from suffering for conscience’s sake. From the latter the early settlers of New England were free; they were firmly convinced that their cause was right and they were the “elect” of God’s people. Perhaps with Jonathan Edwards the Puritan habit of probing into soul takes shape. We discover conscience turning from the testimony that one is “elect” to the doubt whether one is not only damned but worthy of damnation. In his “Personal Narrative,” Edwards confesses “the bottomless depth of secret corruption and deceit there [is] in [his] heart,” “the serpent rising and putting forth its head continually, everywhere all around [him.]”¹⁹

The Puritan habit of a never-ending self-analysis, and self-laceration leads to skepticism as to the possibility of salvation

of soul; they begin to be tormented by doubts and scruples. They feel that however many "duties" they perform, their moral obligation is boundless. However penitent for their Sin, and their sins, they never feel their penitence adequate.²⁰ Their moral imperative to expiate undefined sins finds a soothing bliss in "the path of duty." (So is one of James's stories entitled.) Hence their characteristic "morbidity"; they are obsessed by the sense of guilt and the sense of duty. "It is all well to talk of getting rid of one's ignorance, of seeing things in their reality; seeing them in their beauty; but how is this to be done when there is something which thwarts and spoils all our efforts?" Arnold asks. "This something is *sin*; and the space which sin fills in Hebraism, as compared with Hellenism, is indeed prodigious."²¹

Mrs. Newsome, "a remarkable woman replete with 'the New England conscience,'"²² feels that she must expiate her husband's wealth acquired by quite an unscrupulous way. In their strict conscience the end never justifies means. Thus "the restless conscience" governs their moral conduct and thwarts their enjoyment of privileges of life. It degenerates even into the pathological conscience that everything enjoyable is sinful. To them novel-reading is sinful. So is theater-going. The Puritan distrust of sensuous beauty, against which James rebelled, is an unhappy outcome of this perverted conscience. Their concept of beauty, like Plato's, is the efficient order of things.²³ Exuberance is *not* beauty to them. It does not follow, however, that they are hostile to beauty. None the less this fallacy about Puritanism has been so unduly emphasized during the course of history as to gain the unwelcome tag of "grim, rigid Puritans" we encounter in the market-place in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*.

The concern with defeat and loss, which prevails in James's novels, seems submerged in *The Europeans*, one of his earlier novels which suffered exclusion from the New York Edition. In this perspective the novel assumes its significance and demands

a fair re-consideration. *The Europeans* is "a sketch" for James's numerous international novels. Besides its readability (it is a delightful book) its *raison d'être* lies in the fact that it has some positive values, and that it attempts to synthesize the antithetical values. Also it is James's only work which has a happy ending, that is it ends with four marriages, including Robert Acton's to "a particularly nice girl" after his mother's death.

The Wentworths are typical of "a stiff Puritan stock," of which Rowland Mallet is another descendant. They are anything but gay; they are always repenting. They take things hard, looking at life "as a discipline" and not "as an opportunity." Felix thinks that "there is something the matter with them; they have some melancholy memory or some depressing expectation. It's not the epicurean temperament."²⁴ Gertrude, who is in high spirits when *wicked*, is a scapegoat of the family. Their hospitality toward the Europeans is "an extension of duty, and the exercise of the more recondite virtues."²⁵ They place Duty above all things; "they will never do or say anything for themselves; they are afraid of being selfish."

Now whatever virtues these New Englanders may possess, James never forgets to expose their limitations — their incapacity for art and their failure to enjoy. When Felix offers to do Mr. Wentworth's head, "The Lord made it," Mr. Wentworth solemnly says, "I don't think it is for man to make it over again."²⁶ The only impression their house gives the Europeans is its cleanliness, the very "efficient order of things." The Wentworths cannot tolerate Eugenia's morganatic marriage nor her fibbing, while Eugenia cannot understand why such a kind of fibbing (a polite flattery) is not pleasing to them. Even Robert Acton, a man of the world with the experience of foreign residences, cannot absorb the foreignness of the Baroness. "She is not honest" is the only criticism he can afford for this refinedly corrupt woman. Robert Acton is a good example of "the weakened

strain of New England Puritanism, not the denial of passion by morality, but the use of morality as an excuse for the inadequacy of feeling."²⁷ He is always stealing his hands into his pockets. The "i" is omitted from his name, *Acton*.

In this novel Henry James attempted to dramatize a synthesis of European and American values in the marriage of Felix and Gertrude. Felix functions as a solvent between "the strict conscience" of the Wentworths and "spontaneity of consciousness" of the Europeans. The union is expected to mitigate the grimness and imbue gaiety into the solemn atmosphere. "Then [Gertrude] disappeared, and the echo of gaiety of her own, mingled with that of her husband, often came back to the home of her earlier years. Mr. Wentworth at last found himself listening for it."²⁸ The integration, however, is only partially successful, as the New England ethos fails to accept Eugenia's "foreignness." James's real intent seems to lie in the irony of the aristocratic woman's defeat. For whatever his refinements, Felix is ethically more akin to his New England cousins.

The Ambassadors, "quite the best, 'all round' of [James's] productions," is again the old dialectic of American versus European values. The novel is concerned with a Puritan whose conscience is about to be (as regards to sensuous experience) disencumbered, who is capable of acknowledging what Woollett cannot, the beauty and variety of appearance.²⁹ The great achievement of the novel is that while Strether cannot transcend his "New England conscience" he at least learns that there are other values than his limited experience in Woollett has supplied him with. Unlike the Wentworths, Mrs. Newsome or Chad, Strether has imagination, which awakens him to a wider horizon. It must be remembered that Gertrude also has "a great deal of imagination," which is regarded by her sister as "a dangerous and irresponsible faculty." Gertrude is "a folded flower"³⁰ which has the potentiality to expand, if given a place in the world instead of being confined to a place to do her duty. For to quote

Coleridge, imagination "brings the whole soul of man into activity."

If *The Europeans* implies James's alienation from New England (Eugenia returns to Europe, "which is larger than America,") *The Ambassadors* again explores the inadequacy of "the New England conscience." After the education received at the hand of Maria Gostry, Strether goes back "to be right." This indicates that he goes back to be "true to type," that he sticks to his "New England conscience." But Strether differs from other Americans. As to the sensuous enjoyment of life, Strether learns that there are other possibilities than those he has known in Woollett. On the other hand, Chad, who changes externally, retains his old self, a hard acquisitive Yankee who cannot truly appreciate Madame de Vionnet. Mrs. Newsome, who looms large in her dominance over Strether, is the incarnation of "outraged virtue," another Madame de Mauves. Her restless conscience urges that she must *purify* her inheritance by means of innumerable ideals and activities. She cannot imagine Madame de Vionnet other than a vulgar, base and evil siren who lures away her son.

To Strether ridden with conscience, "a virtuous attachment" literally means "a virtuous attachment." It must be "innocent" for Chad has changed so much for the better. And the process of seeing is accomplished very leisurely, because Strether tries to ignore counter-evidences to avoid the ordeal of his consciousness. After groping and fumbling for a clear vision of reality, Strether sees the truth; the "virtuous attachment" is framed out into a tableau. "What he saw was exactly the right thing—a boat advancing round the bend and containing a man who held the paddles and a lady, at the stern, with a pink parasol. It was suddenly as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the pictures...had now drifted into sight."³¹ Strether's conscience is "disencumbered"; his consciousness is limitlessly "stretched."

Henry James unmistakably upheld the Newmans, Isabels, and Strethers, who are clear of line, self-reliant, and driven by some fire within. James the moralist (he was moral to his fingertips!) admired their "uprightness" and "the handsome thing." The American temperament persisted in James long after his transplantation in Europe. This is only natural for to a certain extent even the "matured" Americans of the 1960's cannot deny nor disinherit their American tradition, which is essentially Puritan in its origin. At the same time he was painfully aware of its deficiencies which exclude the sensuous enjoyment of life and culture. The encumbered conscience makes one "think much more intently of the duties of life than its privileges and pleasures." To James the artist "spontaneity of consciousness," which widens one's horizon, was of the supreme importance. That James was disgusted with "strict conscience" is evident from his ironical treatment of Madame de Mauves as "outraged virtue." For "virtue is none the less becoming for being good-natured."³² Moreover, the dogged conscience narrows one's horizon and makes one unimaginative. James gives another turn of the screw at the end of the *nouvelle*. Euphemia's obstinate clinging conscience kills not herself but her husband.

There comes a time when one set of customs, wherever it may be found, grows to seem to you about as provincial as another; and then I suppose it may be said of you that you have become a cosmopolite. You have formed the habit of comparing, of looking for points of difference and of resemblance, for present and absent advantages, for the virtues that go with certain defects, and the defects that go with certain virtues.³³

From such a vantage point James tried to hold the two antithetical values in balance, as Matthew Arnold believed that "the world ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them—Hebraism and Hellenism."³⁴ James

admitted the inadequacy of "the New England conscience" which compels them to renounce and leaves them a sense of "unlived life." "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't much matter what you do in particular, as long as you have your life."³⁵ This of course is not exclusively Jamesian. The sense of loss is peculiarly American as is observed in their cult of youth. Many of the contemporary novels deal with many Holden Caulfields who refuse to grow up into manhood. But the idea is most deliberately and most elaborately expounded in James's novels.

It would be a mistake to conclude that James was pro-European and that he was an expatriate. For if James was critical of the inadequacy of "the New England conscience" and disgusted by the unrefined Americans and their lack of manners and culture, he was as much repelled by the moral degradation of the superb Europeans, and by the moral vulgarity beneath their smooth social propriety. Mrs. Lowder, the Baron and the Bellegards unscrupulously sacrifice innocence for the prosperity of their house, which is "crumpled ruins." They cannot understand such characters as Madame de Mauves, Newman, or Strether, who are endowed with the ethical light, "the New England conscience." James himself could not decide ultimately which to choose (to him "everything was 'narrowing' except being a student and lover of his fellow men"), but he was optimistic of attaining to a more comprehensive environment which an artist such as James could embrace. James the artist believed — it was always the artist in him that prevailed — that art endures:

The monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilizations as we know it, based if you will upon all the despotism, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies, and the rapacities of the past, but thanks to which all the same, the world is less of a "bloody sell" and life more of a lark.³⁷

When all is said, despite his cosmopolitanism and his vantage point of being an international bachelor, Henry James could not wholly disencumber himself of his "New England conscience," that is if we take *The Ambassadors* as his personal statement. James's novels are concerned with the drama of critical interplay between the antithetical values represented by two different traditions he knew to the core. The relation between Europe and America as James observed and treated it, is at the bottom a relation between aspects of Henry James himself. It is the tension between James's "American" and "European" or "other" self.³⁸ The spirit of his drama is essentially *positive* for it is a *search for* an all-inclusive reality which is neither European nor American, a kind of cultural unity in western civilization.

Notes

1. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York, 1963), p. 23.
2. Henry James, *The American* (Boston, 1962), p. 24.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
4. Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (New York, 1960), p. 24.
5. Sallie Sears, *The Negative Imagination* (Ithaca, 1968), p. 6.
6. J. W. Beach, *The Method of Henry James* (Philadelphia, 1954), p. 149.
7. Henry James, "Madame de Mauves" (New York, 1936), Vol. 13, p. 299.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 289-299.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 319.
13. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York, 1951), Vol. 2, p. 392.
14. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 45.
15. Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James* (New York, 1961), p. 226. Italics are mine.
16. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II, iii, 1. 153.
17. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New York, 1889), pp. 48-49.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
19. Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," *The American Tradition in Literature* (Norton Revised Edition, 1962), pp. 98-99.

20. Austin Warren, *The New England Conscience* (Michigan, 1966), p. 7.
21. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 50.
22. Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, p. 227.
23. Perry Miller & Thomas H. Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York, 1938), p. 62.
24. Henry James, *The Europeans* (New York, 1963), p. 248.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
27. Richard Poirier, *The Comic Sense of Henry James* (New York, 1967), p. 135.
28. Henry James, *The Europeans*, p. 348.
29. Quentin Anderson, *The American Henry James* (New Jersey, 1957), p. 211.
30. Henry James, *The Europeans*, p. 364.
31. Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (New York, 1964), p. 396.
32. Henry James, "Madame de Mauves," p. 293.
33. Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Conquest of London, 1870-1881* (New York, 1962), p. 33.
34. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 46.
35. Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, p. 164.
36. Henry S. Canby, *Turn West, Turu East: Mark Twain and Henry James* (Boston, 1951), p. 64.
37. Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (New York, 1965), p. 334.
38. Quentin Anderson, *The American Henry James*, p. 46.

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