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Autor(en): **Robinson, Alan**

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## Social Spaces in Some Early Tales by Henry James

Alan Robinson

Focusing mainly on "An International Episode" (1878-9) and "The Siege of London" (1883), this essay relates the social spaces depicted in these tales to James's imaginative preoccupations and professional ambitions in this period in which he carved out a niche as a writer in London. His biographical situation, his reflections on the "provincial" and the "cosmopolitan" in travel writings and in *Hawthorne* (1879), and his observations of America in *The American Scene* (1907) provide a context for these stories, which are also linked intertextually to Trollope and to mid-century French drama.

In December 1876 James established base camp just off Piccadilly, where his American protagonists in "An International Episode," *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1) and "Lady Barberina" (1884) also find accommodation. Like the *London Visitors* depicted in James Tissot's 1874 painting and in those of Giuseppe De Nittis, he arrived in a West End whose burgeoning railway hotels, restaurants, department stores, galleries and museums reflected its functional specialisation as a district of consumption, entertainment and fashion. In the later 1870s the lifestyle of its upper-class inhabitants was characterised by a strategic convergence between City finance and an increasingly impecunious aristocracy, through marital alliances and forms of "gentlemanly capitalism."<sup>1</sup> Like other upwardly mobile outsiders, James too was intent on infiltrating fashionable Society, until his initial intoxication with dining-out and country-house weekends was succeeded by a bored satiety.

Within what Bourdieu would term the cultural "field," James's expatriation (like Pound's subsequent move to "the London vortex") was

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<sup>1</sup> On these aspects of late-Victorian London, see Robinson, Chs 6-7; Ch. 8 offers an overview of James's "London," focusing (by contrast with this essay) on his later work.

partly motivated by literary ambition. In *Hawthorne* (1879) he enumerated patronisingly and provocatively the deficiencies which, in his view, prevented literature from flourishing in culturally impoverished America (LC1, 320, 327, 340-2, 351-2). He maintained to Howells that “certain national types are essentially and intrinsically provincial” and in *Hawthorne* contrasted the “provincial” Hawthorne, “the last of the old-fashioned Americans,” with his counterpart of forty years later who is “more Europeanised in advance, more cosmopolitan” (L, II: 267; LC1, 430-1, 441-2). The condescension dissimulated James’s regret that through his peripatetic childhood he had lost an uncomplicated relationship with his own country, which the distance resulting from foreign residence prevented him from recapturing. Under the circumstances, the logical career move was from the margins to the metropolitan centre of English-speaking culture. It also brought financial benefits. Not only were living costs lower in Europe but, as an American citizen residing in an English jurisdiction, he was able to claim copyright on both sides of the Atlantic and thus potentially double his literary income (Anesko).

To be a “cosmopolitan” was, however, a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it gave James an inquisitive tolerance towards other cultures:

“If you have lived about,” he wrote, “you have lost that sense of the absoluteness and the sanctity of the habits of your fellow-patriots which once made you so happy in the midst of them. You have seen that there are a great many *patria* in the world, and that each of these is filled with excellent people for whom the local idiosyncrasies are the only thing that is not rather barbarous. There comes a time when one set of customs, wherever it may be found, grows to seem to you about as provincial as another.” (CTW1 721)

On the other hand, it also gave him a feeling of exclusion. The insights of detached observation came at the price of loneliness, just as gaining access to foreign cultures entailed being disinherited from his own.<sup>2</sup>

The contours of James’s literary imagination were shaped by his complex relationships with America and with his father, Henry James Sr. In rebelling against the overbearing Calvinism and business mind-set of his own magnate father, Henry Sr had necessarily also rejected masculinity as conventionally understood in the aggressively competitive America of his time. (In 1878 Henry Jr described Americans as “the

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<sup>2</sup> L, II: 135; cf. 111, 171. Compare “Americans in Europe are *outsiders*; that is the great point” (CTW1 787) and similar comments in NB 26 and Edel, I: 497-8.

only great people that is exclusively commercial" (*CTW1* 787) and in *The American Scene* (1907), echoing a notebook entry of 1892 (*NB* 129), would describe America, "our vast crude democracy of trade," as polarised into male "unredeemed commercialism" and female "civilization" (51-3, 258.) In his conscious elevation of the things of the spirit above base pelf, Henry Sr, like his contemporary Ruskin, was seeking to convert the economic capital accumulated by the previous generation into cultural capital. But in terms of America's cultural codes this "leisure-class" lifestyle was associated with women rather than men and seen as effeminate rather than manly. The effect of the dilettante Henry Sr's lacking a socially recognised vocation was that his sons grew up in ignorance of the public sphere; Henry Jr was thrown back "upon the inward life" (*A* 35), which fostered his imagination but (unlike Howells or Wharton) gave him no novelistic grasp of the social reality of America.

Habegger has argued that Henry Jr did not go through the conventional rites of passage of a nineteenth-century American male. Instead, famously, six months into the Civil War he suffered an apparent back injury, an "obscure hurt," which defied clinical diagnosis but justified his not participating in what was regarded as the supreme trial of "manhood" of his generation and sanctioned his alternative career as a writer, after a half-hearted interlude at Harvard Law School (Edel; Kaplan).<sup>3</sup> Literature and its readership were, however, a largely female preserve in America, popular fiction at mid-century being dominated by what Hawthorne notoriously complained of as a "damned mob of scribbling women." As if to resolve his anomalous position, Henry Jr thus chose to leave the business-oriented manliness of America behind him, Europe offering a legitimate outlet for his professional ambition.

His uncertainties about his masculine identity could, however, not be dispelled by the fiat of expatriation. Two tales, whose protagonists move between New York and Europe, suggest how James imagined the alternative versions of maleness between which he vacillated. Clement Searle, the dilettante hero of "A Passionate Pilgrim" (1871) is, one conjectures, a fantasy of what might result from the role model offered by Henry Sr. Out of place in his native New York, Searle withdraws into spiritual exile in an imaginary England distilled from his reading, para-

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<sup>3</sup> This psychosomatic injury which Henry Jr sustained while fire-fighting can be interpreted as symptomatic of his identification with his disabled father, whose right leg had had to be amputated above the knee because of damage suffered when, as a teenager, he had tried to stamp out a fire in a hayloft.

sitic on the culture of which he is an epigone. Whereas his compatriots have devoted themselves to "Business," he rejects the Puritan work ethic and exhausts his means of support in a life of self-indulgent hedonism. The author of a slim, privately printed volume of late-Romantic poems, he is a self-pitying drifter who affects a delicate sensibility. His homesick journey to his adoptive birthplace, ostensibly to lay claim to an ancestral inheritance to which he has scant entitlement, is, he realises, a morbid gravitation towards death. His *Liebestod*, which succeeds his fleeting homoerotic ecstasy in the Paterian Oxford of the late 1860s, is embraced in preference to marital consummation.<sup>4</sup> But although Searle's fate implies the unviability of gentlemanly aestheticism, Spencer Brydon, the protagonist of "The Jolly Corner" (1908), manages to survive what has apparently been a similar lifestyle for thirty-three years, before, returning to New York from his European exile, he confronts his alter ego, a fantastic embodiment of the conventional American masculinity he has repressed: the phallic "appetite at any price" of "the pushing male crowd" as it is phrased in the contemporaneous *The American Scene* (65).

James's ambiguous cultural and gender identifications were projected into the shifting experiences of inclusion and exclusion of his early characters, as they negotiate the contrasting mores of England and America. His literary ambition is evident in "An International Episode" and "The Siege of London," which, as if to cast down the gauntlet to the English literary establishment on its own ground, invite comparison with Trollope's later fiction. In their similar concern with actual or presumed attempts by unclassifiable American parvenues to break into London Society, they reveal the alien James himself looking to break into the English fiction market in the prestigious *Cornhill* by capitalising on a fashionable theme. They are in effect a willed effort of naturalisation on James's part, an attempt to assimilate himself to the dominant modes of English fiction. What elevates them above clever pastiche is James's ability not merely to ventriloquise conventional English chauvinism towards the foreign bounder or adventuress but, unconventionally, to empathise with the alien, female perspective and to offer a complementary awareness of the limitations of the Englishman abroad.

"An International Episode" (*T*, IV: 243-327) was conceived as "a *pendant* or counterpart" to "Daisy Miller" (*L*, II: 183, 180). Thus, not

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<sup>4</sup> James's own homoerotic passion on a visit to Oxford is recorded in a letter of 26 April 1869 (Kaplan 99-100). On homosocial culture in Oxford, see Dellamora.

surprisingly, Bessie Alden's situation as the enigmatic, unclassifiable American woman resembles that of her fictional predecessor. Beaumont remarks, "Mrs Westgate tells me that there is no such thing as the 'fast girl' in America; that it's an English invention" (280). He is being disingenuous, for he clearly regards Alden, although somewhat of a blue-stocking, as having designs on the Marquis of Lambeth, the heir to £100,000 per annum (nowadays perhaps £6 million) and a dukedom. Although Alden's sister, Mrs Westgate, insists that she is "not in the least a flirt" (276), Lambeth's mother, the Duchess of Bayswater, cannot decide whether she is "very artless or very audacious" (325). In both stories the Establishment closes ranks to exclude the outsider, just as contemporary London Society was intent on erecting barriers to exclude *personae non gratae* from access to the marriage market. The narrative twist is that in the end Lambeth, flouting the "police duty" (302) of his mother and sister, his "natural protectors" (258), does propose to Alden, only for her to refuse him. Perhaps she feels so wounded by his family's suspicions that she chooses to avoid the hostile condescension that would greet Lambeth's *mésalliance*. Or perhaps she rejects Lambeth for his failure to match her expectations of an English lord, as her residence in London has disabused her of her bookish romanticisation of England and its aristocracy. She realises the incompatibility of her meritocratic criteria for judging "eminence" with Lambeth's aristocratic etiquette of "precedence," and of her earnest Boston intellectualism with his indifference to culture and to his hereditary responsibilities.

Alden's inexperience misleads her in London Society which, like that of James's Europeanized Americans in Geneva and Rome, is an environment where unmarried upper-class and upper middle-class women enjoy notably less freedom than their American counterparts. (An American reviewer of "Daisy Miller" commented: "A few dozens, perhaps a few hundreds, of families in America have accepted the European theory of the necessity of surveillance for young ladies, but it is idle to say it has ever been accepted by the country at large. In every city of the nation young girls of good family, good breeding, and perfect innocence of heart and mind, receive their male acquaintances *en tête-à-tête*, and go to parties and concerts with them, unchaperoned" [Hayes 69].) James's emphasis on the restrictions placed on upper-class women's freedom of movement and association was perceptive: as his later London fiction shows, mobility was an index of female emancipation in general. Mrs Westgate, outlining the prevailing guidelines in the late

1870s, insists that there are two classes of American girls in Europe: those who walk about alone and those who do not (288-9). It is also “not the custom here for young ladies to knock about London with young men” (289; cf. 317). A compromise is effected, whereby their compatriot Willie Woodley acts as a suitable escort. But, Mrs Westgate emphasises, “I consent to your going with Mr Woodley; but I should not let you go with an Englishman” (290).

The assumption in English depictions of “the American girl” was that the greater freedom which she claimed for herself (like “The Girl of the Period” caricatured by Eliza Lynn Linton in 1868) was evidence of unladylike “fastness.” By contrast, the “cosmopolitan” James places the English observers themselves under observation and shows that it is unwise to infer from differing behavioural conventions a corresponding distinction in moral standards. The havoc caused by such ingrained prejudices is wittily depicted in Lambeth and Beaumont’s sojourn in an America which they construct out of their own preconceptions. So much so, that the reader gathers more about the English upper class from what they project onto “America” than from the sections of the tale set in London.

Compared with England, America appears to them a society with no boundaries, where presumably anything goes. On their arrival in New York they are struck by the fluid transition between interior space and the public domain: “The wide doors and windows of the restaurant stood open, beneath large awnings, to a wide pavement, where there were other plants in tubs, and rows of spreading trees, and beyond which there was a large shady square, without any palings and with marble-paved walks” (245). Such airy arrangements are, they suspect, not merely an adjustment to the oppressive heat of a New York summer but also betoken an unbuttoned relaxation, perhaps even a laxity in morals. Influenced not only by the French waiters at their hotel but also by the sight of the pedestrians, “a large proportion of whom were young women in Pompadour-looking dresses,” they provisionally conclude that “It’s like Paris – only more so” (245). When they venture into the exotic outdoors, they are again disconcerted by the square, with crowds of “shabby-looking people” sitting on benches.<sup>5</sup> Where they are used to, in the enclosed world of Belgravia, a locked gate would keep riffraff firmly beyond the palings. Madison Square, shabby but at the same time

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<sup>5</sup> The topography is identified in Dahl.

surprisingly ornate in its marble-paved walks, is accordingly a public space which they cannot translate into their familiar categories of class. Their disorientation is reinforced by another hotel, whose ground-floor “seemed to be a huge transparent cage, flinging a wide glare of gaslight into the street, of which it formed a sort of public adjunct, absorbing and emitting the passers-by promiscuously” (246). The adverb is precise: it evokes the perceived loss of the structuring hierarchy of British society but also their impression of a louche irregularity. These apparent reminders of Parisian boulevards encourage the *flâneur* Lambeth to respond to what he imagines to be the erotically charged atmosphere of the sultry city.

The languid sexuality which Lambeth attributes to young ladies off Fifth Avenue (247) is, however, sublimated in the business quarter downtown, where a “very snug hydraulic elevator shooting upward in its vertical socket” projects the English visitors to the seventh floor of an early skyscraper (250). This is where Mr Westgate spends his time and expends his energies; by contrast, the “leisure-class,” as Mrs Westgate terms it, is exclusively female. Their polarised roles and separate lives are typical of what James would later identify as “*the* feature of the [American] social scene”: men’s absorption in business and women’s function as the conspicuous consumers of male capital and the agents of its conversion into culture and “civilized” values (*AS* 50-2, 65, 123-4, 254-9). The American consensus is that “It was a pity Mr Westgate was always away [. . .] He worked like a horse and he left his wife – well, to do about as she liked. He liked her to enjoy herself, and she seemed to know how” (269). To British ears, however, an innuendo attaches to Mrs Westgate’s activities. She refers later to her “ex-pensioners – gentlemen who, as she said, had made, in New York, a club-house of her drawing-room” (310). In London a hostess who, with her husband’s connivance or indifference, entertained only males, forfeited all claim to respectability. Hence the frosty put-down uttered by Lambeth’s mother, as she retorts to Alden’s comment that Lambeth “has been to see us very often – he has been very kind”:

“I dare say you are used to that. I am told there is a great deal of that in America.”

“A great deal of kindness?” the young girl inquired, smiling.

“Is that what you call it? I know you have different expressions.” (324)



But the Duchess is perhaps jumping to a conclusion, just as her son and his minder presumptuously misread the cultural signals in what they take to be the land of opportunity.

Their obtuseness is apparent when they are invited to enjoy Mrs Westgate's hospitality at Newport. Their first impressions, in an extraordinary passage that anticipates the sexual extravagances of James's late style, are once again of their hotel:

They found a great deal of entertainment at the hotel, an enormous wooden structure, for the erection of which it seemed to them that the virgin forests of the West must have been terribly deflowered. It was perforated from end to end with immense bare corridors, through which a strong draught was blowing – bearing along wonderful figures of ladies in white morning-dresses and clouds of Valenciennes lace, who seemed to float down the long vistas with expanded furbelows, like angels spreading their wings. In front was a gigantic verandah [. . .] Here our young Englishmen enjoyed, as they supposed, a glimpse of American society, which was distributed over the measureless expanse in a variety of sedentary attitudes, and appeared to consist largely of pretty young girls, dressed as if for a *fête champêtre*, swaying to and fro in rocking-chairs, fanning themselves with large straw fans, and enjoying an enviable exemption from social cares. (259-60)

The narrator's "it seemed to them" and "as they supposed" make explicit his distance from the Englishmen's fantasies of Angel Mothers and nymphets. Their delusion is that they have arrived in a rococo paradise of nubile women, the journey to Rhode Island being in effect a Watteauesque *Voyage à Cythère*.<sup>6</sup>

The misperception that these young women are sexually available corresponds to another misperception: namely, that, as its architecture seems to imply, America is an open society. The "perforation" of the hotel, with its sexual and social connotations, is paralleled by that of Mrs Westgate's house, which "had a verandah of extraordinary width all around it, and a great many doors and windows standing open to the verandah. These various apertures had, in common, such an accessible, hospitable air, such a breezy flutter, within, of light curtains, such expansive thresholds and reassuring interiors, that our friends hardly knew which was the regular entrance" (261). By contrast with the constrictions of London Society it seems to them almost too good to be true. (It is a replay of "Daisy Miller," when Winterbourne is at Vevey rather than

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<sup>6</sup> For James's more restrained outline of why "Newport must be a most agreeable sojourn for the male sex," see "Newport" (1870), in *CTW* 1 760-1.

in Calvinist Geneva.) But the ladies whom they see out driving are concealed, not merely from the sun's glare, behind "thick blue veils" (261). As is repeatedly the case in these stories, the American woman remains impenetrable to the Englishman's gaze.

Despite its ostensible transparency, American society likewise turns out to be frustratingly opaque. For the Englishmen are greeted with a friendliness so unvarying as to suggest that it is inauthentic: the Americans at Mrs Westgate's "looked at the young Englishmen with an air of animated sympathy and interest; they smiled, brightly and unanimously, at everything either of the visitors said" (263). What perplexes the patrician Englishmen is clarified by a passage in James's equally patrician impressions of *The American Scene*. James criticises American houses because, unlike English ones, they make no differentiation between rooms for different purposes nor between public and private spaces: "every part of every house shall be, as nearly as may be, visible, visitable, penetrable, not only from every other part, but from as many parts of as many other houses as possible, if they only be near enough." This absence of boundaries, expressing America's democratic ethos through its architecture, entails "the complete proscription of privacy," reducing conversation in these echo chambers to superficialities.<sup>7</sup>

In "An International Episode" and "Daisy Miller" the "cosmopolitan" James demonstrated the misperceptions that result from applying European criteria to American women. "The Siege of London" (*T*, V: 13-110) takes a different approach: through the point of view of the outsider, it criticises English mores. It is thus a transitional text, heralding James's shift from the international theme of his early work to his exclusive focus on English society from 1888 until the end of the century. His sources for this tale adopted a viewpoint consonant with the values of the Establishment. James's more ambiguous position emerges in the ways he transformed them. His protagonist, Mrs Headway, is clearly modelled on Mrs Hurtle in Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1874-5), whose attempt to enter English Society is resolutely repulsed.<sup>8</sup> Like Mrs Hurtle, Mrs Headway "had been exceedingly divorced! [. . .]

<sup>7</sup> *AS* 125-7. On the "unmitigated publicity" and gregariousness of American society, see also pp. 11-12, 28, 78-81, 324-5.

<sup>8</sup> James's indebtedness is indicated also by his geographical confusion. Mrs Headway's relationship with Littlemore goes back to evenings spent "On the back piazza, at San Diego," which the narrator persistently locates not in California but in New Mexico: in other words, on the route of the South Central Pacific and Mexican Railway in Trollope's novel.

She was a charming woman, especially for New Mexico; but she had been divorced too often – it was a tax on one's credulity; she must have repudiated more husbands than she had married" (23). Adept at self-protection, rejected by New York society, Mrs Headway is thus, like her Trollopian predecessor, a derivative stereotype: "a genuine product of the far West – a flower of the Pacific slope; ignorant, audacious, crude, but full of pluck and spirit, of natural intelligence, and of a certain intermittent, haphazard good taste" (24; cf. 47).

James's indebtedness to Trollope is not acknowledged. By contrast, two other influences are made explicit: Emile Augier's *L'Aventurière* (1848, 1860) and *Le Demi-Monde* (1855) by Alexandre Dumas  *fils*. In the former an adventuress tries to trick a rich bourgeois into marriage, only for her plot to be foiled by his son. In the latter the *demi-mondaine* Suzanne d'Ange tries to rehabilitate herself by marrying an honourable man, Raymond de Nanjac. Her former lover, Olivier de Jalin, feels obliged to enlighten his friend Nanjac about her dubious past, finally resorting to deception to expose her designs. In both plays male bonding ensures that respectability and family honour are preserved. The tale that grew from this germ not merely dissents from Dumas  *fils*'s complacent assumption that the end justifies the means but also sympathises with the position of the American outsider.

James's story opens with a performance of *L'Aventurière*. One spectator, Waterville, has a few nights earlier seen *Le Demi-Monde* and his response to both plays echoes James's own: "It seemed to him that in both of these cases the ladies had deserved their fate, but he wished it might have been brought about by a little less lying on the part of the representatives of honor" (29; cf. *CTW2* 734). The action on stage is replicated offstage, for in the interval Waterville and Littlemore witness Mrs Headway's courtship of Sir Arthur Demesne, establishing a parallel between her and the adventuresses in the French plays. This metafictional element, whereby the main characters are not only spectators but also re-enactors of the plays, is perhaps overly contrived. A more interesting complication is James's revision of the Olivier role in *Le Demi-Monde*. Overtly, this is split between two male characters: Waterville and Littlemore. Waterville resolutely refuses to comment on Mrs Headway; Littlemore resists the pressure to speak out until finally – too late – he divulges the truth. He does so under duress when his sister confronts him with Sir Arthur's mother, Lady Demesne, whom he has hitherto succeeded in avoiding. The sister's stratagem is the nearest equivalent in

James's tale to the duplicity which James had found so abhorrent in Olivier. In rewriting *Le Demi-Monde* James thus removed the element of male solidarity – Waterville and Littlemore are no friends of Sir Arthur – and reduced all the men to passive, ineffectual figures. Instead, action is initiated by the three forceful women and it is a female rather than a male conspiracy that attempts to engineer the downfall of the female intruder onto their turf.

James's insight is that the socially privileged of both sexes stood to gain from the maintenance of the status quo, to which Mrs Headway's obscure antecedents pose a threat. Littlemore's power to make or break her derives from the shady past which he shares with her, the sexual double standard enabling him to act as arbiter of actions which for him as a man have no consequences. In America he has found her "amusing" (like Mrs Westgate in "An International Episode") and in Europe is happy to frequent her house, together with other men of the world – "it was the absence of the usual social incumbrances which made her drawing-room attractive" (42) – but his lack of respect for her is confirmed by his refusal to introduce her to his sister. While she might make a capital wife (109), she is not the kind of woman a gentleman would contemplate marrying. Thus, although both Littlemore and Waterville are seduced by her erotic charm, in the end their "sense of fitness" would be offended or scandalised by her admittance to Society.

Although it is the men who profit most from the regulation of female sexuality, the women who are complicit in this system are also intent on preserving their position. They can do so only by supporting the men on whom they are dependent. The narrator thus shows understanding for Lady Demesne's attempt to forestall her son's *mésalliance*. Like the corresponding intervention of Littlemore's sister, Mrs Dolphin, an American who has married into the English gentry and does not want transatlantic marriages to get a bad name, it is self-interested. Lady Demesne is a clever tactician who is fighting to preserve her family property and the inherited prestige which her banker father's new money has bought. She has been married into a long line of Warwickshire squires whose inbreeding has narrowed their intelligence and intensified their prejudices. She must accordingly work hard to compensate for the deficiencies of her son, on whom, after her husband's premature death, her devotion and her ambitions are concentrated.

If this lends her endeavours a certain pathos, the narrator also indicates that the prize that both she and her rival Mrs Headway covet is

not worth the candle. For although Sir Arthur is bolstered by his title and the nepotistic connections which have led to his election as Conservative MP for a market town, passages of interior monologue leave no doubt as to his bovine limitations: "He suspected that [Mrs Headway] was provincial, but as he was very much under the charm he compromised matters by saying to himself that she was only foreign. It was of course provincial to be foreign; but this was, after all, a peculiarity which she shared with a great many nice people" (46). James's *obiter dicta* of this period indicate that he would reverse Sir Arthur's fatuous judgement: it is he who is "provincial." As James remarked in 1877: "The creature most odious to me in the world is the English narrow middle-class Tory!" (*L*, II: 134). By contrast, the cosmopolitan Mrs Headway (whom he later described as "an innocent adventuress") would surely have commanded the author's sympathies as much as her forebear Mme d'Ange, the "clever and superior woman" had done in her eager, "almost heroic, effort" (*NB* 128; *CTW2* 733).

With the odds stacked against her, Mrs Headway is engaged in the performance of her life. Her premiere takes place at the Demesnes' country house, Longlands, to which Waterville hastens as if he had received a *billet d'auteur* for the first night of a new comedy (68). Having spent two hours dressing and making herself up, she makes a self-consciously theatrical entrance into English society, slowly descending the stairs to dinner, the last guest on whom everyone's eyes are fixed. What greets her is seen through Waterville's American eyes; it is perhaps not fanciful to assume that his viewpoint resembles James's own:

All those people seemed so completely made up, so unconscious of effort, so surrounded with things to rest upon; the men with their clean complexions, their well-hung chins, their cold, pleasant eyes, their shoulders set back, their absence of gesture; the women, several very handsome, half strangled in strings of pearls, with smooth plain tresses, seeming to look at nothing in particular, supporting silence as if it were as becoming as candle-light, yet talking a little, sometimes, in fresh, rich voices. They were all wrapped in a community of ideas, of traditions; they understood each other's accent, even each other's variations. Mrs Headway, with all her prettiness, seemed to transcend these variations; she looked foreign, exaggerated; she had too much expression; she might have been engaged for the evening. Waterville remarked, moreover, that English society was always looking out for amusement and that its transactions were conducted on a cash basis. If Mrs Headway were amusing enough she would probably succeed [. . .]. (72)

Waterville's cynical observation will be borne out: Mrs Headway's fund of American slang leads London Society to take her up as an entertaining freak, whose hilarious Americanisms are in vogue as the flavour of the month (90-1). She has the last laugh, however, as despite the efforts to thwart her, she succeeds in netting Sir Arthur.

One senses here some of the deepest anxieties of James the cultural alien: were his many dining invitations, like Mrs Headway's, simply engagements for the evening; as an artist, was he too simply tolerated "on a cash basis"? These insecurities surface in Waterville's view of the serried ranks of the English Establishment. The outsider idealises the effortless assurance of the insiders, while simultaneously resenting their impassive hauteur and satirising their emotional and intellectual vacuousness. Their undemonstrative power is chillingly impressive but factitious: "so completely made up." This complex mixture of fascination and revulsion is evident in the elusive phrase "their well-hung chins." Is this a euphemism for pendulous jowls, or, conversely, does it imply the clean-cut, sporty physique of huntsmen? Or does it mockingly equate them with the dead game, to the pursuit of which so much of their mindless leisure was devoted? There is a similar ambivalence in the description of the women "half strangled in strings of pearls." It suggests a fantasised outlet for Waterville's irritation, making the women also well hanged. But it also suggests a more sympathetic response to their stifling constriction in a marriage market where they are used to cement dynastic alliances, transfer property and act as material objects of display.

The satirical targets are not dissimilar to those of late Dickens or late Trollope. What is distinctive is the foreigner's consciousness of exclusion because he doesn't know the shibboleth of London Society ("they understood each other's accent, even each other's variations"): the idioms, inflections and tacit cultural references which constitute a shared experience that the non-native speaker can never instinctively reproduce. As a result, the insiders are "wrapped in a community of ideas, of traditions," whereas the alien – to the degree that he wants to belong to this group whose like-mindedness he idealises as snug rather than smug – feels left out in the cold. These experiences of inclusion and exclusion, which come into play to foster group solidarity, can easily be reversed. Sir Arthur, cosily integrated into the Conservative gentry, is disconcertingly alienated by the Americanness of Mrs Headway, who "was like an Hungarian or a Pole, with the difference that he could almost understand her language" (47).

At this stage in James's work, the condition of almost understanding the other's language is restricted to the misperceptions and unconscious prejudices which render "provincial" cultures mutually incomprehensible. But in these social comedies his narratorial perspective as a "cosmopolitan" outsider already foreshadows his subsequent exploration of the epistemological limits of human experience, in which ultimately, it appears, each of us is imprisoned in the "cage" of our subjective construction of "reality."

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