

**THE PORTRAIT OF ENGLAND IN HENRY JAMES'S
INTERNATIONAL NOVELS**

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Abstract: *In his international novels, Henry James builds the image of England through the eyes of the American characters that travel in this country. London is the perfect setting for his international novels, as it becomes an integral part of the person or the action he is narrating.*

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1. Introduction

The connection between James and England has biographical, personal and historical, public aspects which are mediated through the literary.

Britain, for James, is a cultural myth articulated through writers from Shakespeare to Dickens and Thackeray, absorbed, emulated, even resented and recast, by an author constructing the reality of his own achievement through the development of his fictional world. The deliberate adoption of a culture at once familiar and inexorably alien assured James the ideal stance for his narrative and critical persona: that of the intimate outsider. (Bradbury 2008:400)

From all the European cities, London generated a high passion for James, which survived with him, renewed itself later on and flowered in his literary works. It actually represents the form into which is poured his richer passion for the race to which he belongs. London was the gate to the European civilization. Besides being a geographical, political power base, it was mainly a cultural construct for James, as it was the home of many sacred names, such as: Shakespeare, Johnson, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Ruskin, Tennyson, Browning, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot. It was a personal and professional opportunity, the challenge of a literary career and the site of independence. The immense value given by James to London can easily be seen in one of his *Notebooks* entries:

London is on the whole the most possible form of life. I take it as an artist and as a bachelor; as one who has the passion of observation and whose business is the study of human life. It is the biggest aggregation of human life – the most complete compendium of the world. The human race is better represented there than anywhere else, and if you learn to know your London you learn a great many things. (James 1947:28)

Henry James chose to settle in England as he wrote to George Abbot James on March 20, 1869: “I have seen a moderate number of people & things & made the most of my small opportunities” (Horne 1999:23) and he met “Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), ... Dickens’s daughter Kate, the poet Aubrey de Vere (1814-1902), and most notable perhaps, William Morris and John Ruskin himself. The day after this letter HJ would lunch with Charles Darwin.” (Horne 1999:23) After he returned to England in 1875, he took rooms in Bolton Street

off Piccadilly, became an honorary member of the Athenaeum Club, so he wrote to William James that:

London life jogs along with me, pausing every now & then at some more or less succulent patch of herbage. I was almost ashamed to tell you thro' mother that I, unworthy, was seeing a bit of Huxley. I went to his house again last Sunday evening – a pleasant, easy, no-dress-coat sort of house... Yesterday I dined with Lord Houghton – with Gladstone, Tennyson, Dr Schiellmann (the excavator of old Mycenae&c) & half a dozen other men of 'high culture'. I sat next but one to the Bard... (Horne 1999:79-80)

His social life was a fruitful and intense one, as he declared in 1879 that he had dined out on 109 nights. After a long residence to London, he changed his preferences and decided to establish himself at Lamb House in Rye on the Sussex coast.

At the climax of his literary carrier, James started to counterpoise the cultural opportunity of England with his sense of the claims of America, as he advised Edith Wharton: "Profit, be warned, by my awful example of exile & ignorance....*Do New York!*" (Horne 1999: 368) As a matter of fact, James formed his own conclusions regarding the Englishmen very early, as he wrote a letter to his mother when he was only twenty-six years old, telling her that: "Englishmen...not only kill, but bury in unfathomable depths, the Americans." (James 1974:152)

In the same spirit he wrote to Edwin Lawrence Godkin on June 5, 1882 that "London seems big & black & actual – it is a brutal sort of place compared with New York. But I revert to it with a kind of filial fondness – which is a proof, I suppose, that I have become brutalized." (Horne 1999:139) James is

somehow caught between ambition and rejection, and he seems to have an ambivalent position:

I have not the least hesitation in saying that I aspire to write in such a way that it wd. [sic] be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am, at a given moment, an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as I do with both countries) & so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized. (Horne 1999:213)

2. The Image of England in the International Novels

In the preface to the novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (1999/1881) that he wrote for the New York Edition, James says about the circumstances of his writing that: “I had, within the few preceding years, come to live in London, and the ‘international’ light lay, in those days, to my sense, thick and rich upon the scene” (James 1962:57-58). *The Portrait of a Lady* (1999) is the novel where James makes the most articulate use of Englishness, in culture, ideology, but first and most memorably, in place. It is the first novel that presents the familiar life of an old English country-house. It starts with the description of Gardencourt, insisting upon the sense of property:

It stood upon a low hill, above the river – the river being the Thames, at some forty miles from London. A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of which time and the weather had played all sorts of picturesque tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented itself to the lawn, with its patches of ivy, its clustered chimneys, its windows smothered in creepers. The house had a name and a history; the old gentleman taking his tea would have been delighted to tell you these things: how it had been built under Edward the Sixth, had offered a night’s hospitality to the great

Elizabeth (whose august person had extended itself upon a huge, magnificent, and terribly angular bed which still formed the principal honor of the sleeping apartments), had been a good deal bruised and defaced in Cromwell's wars, and then, under the Restoration, repaired and much enlarged; and how, finally, after having been remodeled and disfigured in the eighteenth century, it had passed into the careful keeping of a shrewd American banker, who had bought it originally because (owing to circumstances too complicated to set forth) it was offered a great bargain; bought it with much grumbling at its ugliness, its antiquity, its incommmodity, and who now, at the end of the twenty years, had become conscious of a real aesthetic passion for it, so that he knew all its points, and would tell you just where to stand to see them in combination, and just the hour when the shadows of its various protuberances – which fell so softly upon the warm weary brickwork – were of the right measure.

All these details show the significance of the English ceremony, not a ceremony of innocence but of custom and concord. At the same time, Mrs. Touchett is “not fond of the English style of life”: “She detested bread-sauce...objected to the consumption of beer by her maid-servants; and she affirmed that the British laundress...was not a mistress of her art.” (James 1999:54) Mr. Touchett “had no intention of disamericanising” (James 1999:54). Isabel's host emphasizes to Isabel the negative aspect of the English conventionality: “They've got everything pretty well-fixed...It's all settled beforehand – they don't leave it to the last moment.” (James 1999:75) Ralph himself says that:” [O]ne doesn't give up one's country any more than one gives up one's grandmother. They're both antecedent to choice – elements of one's composition that are not to be eliminated.” (James 1999:109)

James's concern with the international social conflict in terms of marriage reflected a historical fact, because intermarriage became a major

feature of the social relations between America and Europe after the Civil War. It was the marriage between the European man and the American girl. Henry James makes a distinction between the American and European antagonists of the American girl, between Osmond and Lord Warburton, between their relations to tradition. If Osmond's traditionalism is a calculated attitude which intends to fill in his lack of individual substance, Lord Warburton has deep and secure traditions that he can rely on. That is why Osmond wants him so much as a husband for his daughter.

Osmond is, as well as Madame Merle, not a European but an American expatriate. He is corrupt and false, lacking individual substance. His corruption is not the result of his being an American but it illustrates the danger which Europe exposes Americans to.

It is a danger inherent in the very process of ordering experience significantly – the danger that the order, the form, which results from the action of the spirit on experience, becomes frozen and self-sufficient and finally imprisons the very spirit which gave it birth. It is the danger typical of Europe, where the past lingers not only in the form of ruins and associations but in the form also of institutions which tend to perpetuate themselves even when their reason for being if not their meaning is antiquated. (Wegelin 1958:74-75)

England represents positive values too, as Isabel sees in Lord Warburton, a “specimen of an English gentleman” (James 1999:83) and in the eyes of his sisters: “the peace, the kindness, the honor, the possessions, a deep security” (James 1999:154). Despite these, she refuses his proposal, as she has a different vision on aristocracy than him.

She thinks of it as 'simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty,' and it is for her liberty that she fears. Not that Warburton would imprison her as Osmond tries to do. There is no doubt of his consideration, his kindness; there is nothing in the least sinister about him. Yet she regards his proposal somehow as the design of 'a territorial, a political, a social magnate' to draw her into a 'system', the system of which his sisters are such charming but such ominously pale products. (Wegelin 1958:75)

His only fault seems to be that of being born a nobleman, an English Lord, as Isabel "is used to judging people on the basis of 'character and wit,' on the basis of the question whether they please 'her sublime soul' – according to rules too simple to serve as a measure of Warburton's qualifications." (Wegelin 1958:75)

The American tradition of democratic criticism of Europe is dramatized by James through Henrietta Stackpole. It was her desire to come to Europe to report and even if she

is aggressively suspicious of all that smacks of privilege and class, and most of all of American prostration before European standards, her career serves mainly as a kind of comic counterpoint to Isabel's melancholy story, since she ends not only by tolerating all that she at first suspects, but by marrying a thorough British and, unlike Isabel, finding happiness in her marriage. (Wegelin 1958:65)

Isabel Archer's story is about her disillusionment. If the first part of the novel presents Isabel's romantic character, the second one is a picture of what the lesson of Europe has made of it. London inspired James to write about the first adult experience of England.

Gardencourt, Hardwick, England, personal and professional opportunity, and the threat of waste, circling around the figure of the American girl, and marshaled through the discipline of fictional architecture, provide material even richer than this novel can contain: material for more work, throughout James's career, and the subject of reflection in the late phase of the prefaces to the New York Edition. (Bradbury 2008:409)

In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and all late novels of Henry James, the international theme is no longer just a tool of social analysis and criticism, it is no longer about Europe and America, but about the American experience of Europe and the European experience of America. The opposition between Americans and Europeans goes beyond the external aspect, it becomes a growth of the individual awareness of foreign modes of living, thinking. It is "both a manifestation of and a metaphor for the gap between the Self and the Other." (Armstrong 1983:144) Europe is obviously the Other, because James has an American identity.

The interior world is described as an uncertain place, as well as the exterior world. Such an example is the commercial world of Lancaster Gate, where "nobody...does anything for nothing." (James 1907-1909:160) James avoids drawing a clear line between the "good" and "bad characters". When Milly Theale comes "to see the places she had read about" (James 1965:99), she recognizes that "the working and the worked were, in London... the parties to every relation... The worker in one connection was the worked in another; it was as broad as it was long – with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled." (James 1965:118)

Europe is represented by Aunt Maud Lowder and Lord Mark. Aunt Maud rules this world and is revealed to us as the “Britannia of the Market Place – Britannia unmistakable, but with a pen in her ear”. (James 1965:27) With “her florid philistinism” and “a reticule for her prejudices as deep as that other pocket, the pocket full of coins stamped in her image” is further called “unscrupulous and immoral”. (James 1965:28) Milly Theale steps into this world and thinks that Mrs Lowder “represented ... the world, the world that, as a consequence of the cold shoulder turned to it by the Pilgrim Fathers, had never yet boldly crossed Boston.” (James 1965:107) Not only Milly does understand the substance of this world, but also Kate, as “both Kate and Milly somehow mistake Lancaster Gate as a place where life could flourish” and this “indicates not simply the deceptive appearances of the social world but, more important, the extent to which Kate and Milly have unwittingly absorbed the values inherent in that world.” (Fowler 1993:193)

Henry James chooses London scenes with a very definite purpose: it becomes an integral part of the person or the action he is narrating. This practice can also be found with Balzac, who considered that placing a character in a certain place was similar to placing him on a social graph. The beginning of the novel is a very good example of this method:

Kate Croy visits her father in fictional Chirk Street and sees everything in terms of a lower middle-class environment. The ‘shabby sofa’ and an ‘armchair upholstered in a glazed cloth’ that appears ‘slippery’ and ‘sticky’ create the personality of the man and his reduced circumstances, even down to the blunt-sounding street name that literally means to cheer up. Everything reminds her of his ‘failure of fortune and of honour,’ the fitting next step on the way down from the ‘blighted home in Lexham Gardens’

that they once occupied. The whole picture contrasts with Aunt Maud's 'tall reach house' at prestigious-sounding and socially prominent Lancaster Gate in Bayswater where Kate has gone to live. Although not among the most exclusive addresses in the city, it is far above 'the small homely hum of Chirk Street. (Kimmey 1991:10)

Kate and Milly suffer from the constraints of being women. Kate's father and sister, Miriam Condrip, allow her Aunt Maud to find her a successful marriage. "It was through Kate that Aunt Maud should be worked, and nothing mattered less than what might become of Kate in the process." (James 1907-9:34) Kate enjoys the experience of life offered by Aunt Maud, but being in love with the penniless Merton Densher, she appreciates more the love than Aunt Maud's highest marriage bid. In Milly Theale's desire to find in Europe a sense of having lived and in her approaching Kate Croy and Merton Densher as two more elements of the European scene, she denies the Other's subjectivity and the possibility of an intimate relation to the Other.

The novel is based again on the international contrast as a part of the theme of the lived life. It is "concerned with the corruption, the perversion of motives attendant upon the process of refinement when social organization becomes subservient to greed." (Wegelin 1958:106) If Milly Theale is very much idealized, her European antagonists are not simply condemned. The novel deals with the European experience of America.

The novel *The Golden Bowl* (1904) presents not only the wealthiest Americans but also the most aristocratic European from James's international novels. Henry James dramatizes the incongruities between reality and appearances, which Maggie Verver and Prince Amerigo are forced to discover.

In the Preface to the novel, he mentions that London is a support for his ideas and novel:

The thing was to induce the vision of Portland Place to generalize itself. This is precisely, however, the fashion after which the prodigious city...does on occasion meet halfway those forms of intelligence of it that it recognizes. All of which meant that at a given moment the great featureless Philistine vista would itself perform a miracle, would become interesting, for a splendid atmospheric hour, as only London knows how; and that our business would be then to understand. (James 1962:335)

In *The Golden Bowl*, Book 1 “The Prince” is placed in London, Brighton, and the country house at Matcham, with an adulterous interlude in Gloucester. While the Princess lives in her imagination, the negative characters make free of England: “The Prince had always liked his London...; he was one of the modern Romans who find by the Thames a more convincing image of the truth of the ancient state than any they have left by the Tiber”. (James 1995:3) Three protagonists are American and one is Italian, but the image of the European society is realized in British terms. Adam’s town house is in “Portland Place, where Mr Verver had pitched a tent suggesting that of Alexander furnished with the spoils of Darius.” (James 1995:13)

3. Conclusion

Henry James was fascinated with England and he chose London as a place to live and work, and the main setting for his international novels. He also found inspiration and provocation in the English novels. An explanation of his

decision to become a British subject towards the end of his life was his fascination with the old England. In 1905, he proposed to Edith Wharton:

This absurd old England is still, after long years, so marvelous to me, & the visitation of beautiful old houses (as to “buy” – seeing them *as* one then sees them), such a refinement of bliss. Won’t you come out with Pagello, & a luncheon-basket, & feign at least an intention of purchase – taking me with you to do the lying? (Horne 1999:422)

Even if James knew the social realities and political economy of Europe and especially England, he couldn’t avoid a historical comparison and his culturally intelligence of the observer abroad. Henry James lived in England to work there, but preserved the edge of otherness.

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