

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

The Jamesian Journey

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## INTRODUCTION

I evoke the archetypal Edenic myth as the basic idea for this essay, and in so doing have some sanction from James himself, who, in writing of his own "fortunate fall" said, "Very special and very interesting to catch in the fact the state of being of the American who has bitten deep into the apple of 'Europe' and then been obliged to take his lips from the fruit."<sup>1</sup> In quoting this statement Leon Edel says that James came to regard himself ironically, as having left his own Paradise to venture forth to Europe. In his novels James often represents the innocence/experience bifurcation in terms of America and Europe. Edel says, "In James's fiction Americans are often treated as if they still possess the innocence of Eden; and in their unawareness of evil they are shown as highly vulnerable once they venture outside their American Paradise."<sup>2</sup>

James's use of the myth is both universal and American. The Edenic myth is significant in American cultural and creative thought. R.W.B. Lewis in his The American Adam says of Henry James, Sr., "In drawing up his definition of human experience [he] frequently employed the metaphor of Adam and Eve." He also states that the elder James "suggested how the drama of Adam should proceed, or how, to put it differently, the young culture should

finally achieve its maturity. . . . In order to enter the ranks of manhood, the individual (however fair) had to fall, had to pass beyond childhood in an encounter with 'Evil', had to mature by virtue of the destruction of his own egotism."<sup>3</sup> Henry James Jr. uses the Edenic myth in his art and dramatizes the limited perception of the innocent in a world he seeks to understand.

America did not provide, for James, sufficient material which he could utilize as social experience. His own Transatlantic journeys to Europe and his residence there gave rise to the image for the dialectical encounter which he could best relate to "experience" in the widest sense. The ascetic/aesthetic, American/European dichotomy contains contrasting systems of value, and by bringing these systems into confrontation with each other James dramatizes the individuating process which is depicted as the Fall. It is the fall into knowledge and self-awareness, and paradoxically, it is also a rising up from the darkness of ignorance.

James applies the Edenic myth in dealing with the fundamental aspect of the individual's development, i.e., the growth towards maturity, through the integration of experience. The initial error which characterizes the state of innocence is that experience will conform to pre-supposition. When events expose the fallacious assumptions, the central character experiences a supreme

dislocation, one wherein a portion of his being is confuted. A betrayal of the self takes place. Overcoming the anguish of this betrayal is the struggle. The integration is manifested in internal adaptation.

James renders this process as a journey from a prior state of innocence into a realm of experience. The condition of innocence is a mental state which is fixed, and wherein all of the categories have been firmly established, but remain untested. The journey into experience is a confrontation with another set of categories, another way of seeing, and consequently a testing of the values and beliefs hitherto unquestioned. It is a movement from a world of certainties into a world of flux. During this movement a dialectic between unexamined assumptions and experience ensues within the Jamesian character. Out of this encounter he creates a new and tentative set of categories with which to confront experience. And, since he has entered the world of process, the testing will and must continue. The dénouement of James's novels is not one of stasis for the traveler. Once he enters the world of process the illusion of the "happily ever after" ending dissolves. The journey of change and accommodation, the journey towards self-knowledge, continues until one dies. While the mode of passage for each protagonist is different, the act of passage is the same, in the sense that there is a movement from a previous state to a new condition.

The principal character's symbolic beginning and subsequent movement are often figured in garden imagery. As well, his travels are significant either as relating directly to an advance in knowledge, or, ironically to an imitation of change.

The reader is able to participate in the journey from Eden into the world through the consciousness of the central character in each novel. Travel and seeing, rather than travel and doing, are closely connected in James, as "seeing" and "knowing" are markedly related. In the Preface to The Ambassadors James says, "the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision."<sup>4</sup> Thus James neatly fuses the notion of seeing with process and with movement. In speaking of James's technique, F.O. Matthiessen says, "What distinguished him from French naturalists and English aesthetes alike was that he never forgot the further kind of seeing, the transcendent passage to the world behind appearances and beyond the senses."<sup>5</sup> Leon Edel comments that "At every turn James invites us to look: and through sight we are asked to charge our other senses."<sup>6</sup> Lyall H. Powers contends that "The sign of maturity in the Jamesian protagonist is clear vision--the ability to see and know the truth about things as they really are."<sup>7</sup>

To transcend the limitations of one's given set of



values is a great triumph of sight in James. In order to do that all of the experience we may encounter must be assimilated, indeed welcomed. Only by such assimilation may we achieve the inner movement which is the true life's journey. The purpose of the journey is to gain illumination, and experience is the vessel or the coach which carries the mental traveler.

While it is the contention of this essay that the basic idea of James's novels of innocence and experience is the Edenic myth, the controlling metaphor is that of the journey. I have cited, where applicable, the principal images of travel in the novels under discussion. James himself speaks of his minor characters as "wheels to the coach" in his Preface to The Portrait of a Lady: "each of these persons is but wheels to the coach; neither belongs to the body of that vehicle, or is for a moment accommodated with a seat inside."<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note James's concept of the main character as a coach, thus emphasizing the image of travel. In every novel under discussion, furthermore, the central characters embark on significant journeys.

I believe that a fair chronological sampling is contained in the works under discussion, spanning the years 1877 to 1904. I have selected the following five novels to represent the growth and development of James's art: The American, The Portrait of a Lady, The Spoils of Poynton,

The Ambassadors and The Golden Bowl.<sup>9</sup> With respect to an understanding of James's work, T.S. Eliot has said:

"One thing is certain, that the books of Henry James form a complete whole. One must read all of them, for one must grasp, if anything, both the unity and the progression. The gradual development, and the fundamental identity of spirit are both important, and their lesson is one lesson."<sup>10</sup> Certainly there is an identity of spirit, as I hope to demonstrate, but it is not possible to explicate the entire corpus of James's work to discover it. As well, I hope to depict James's expanding vision, his "progression" as Eliot so aptly names it, in the delineation and increasing depth of his chief characters as the process and progress of his art unfolds.

The first chapter of this essay describes the limitations and the possibilities of each central character as that character is constituted at the outset. Each one possesses a potential for self-knowledge, psychological insight, which in James is the true knowledge. From our introduction to the protagonist we thus obtain an idea of his capacities. Experience will be the agent and the power of his true potential. This initial description is the point of departure on the journey of discovery for the Jamesian protagonist.

The second chapter deals with the response of each protagonist to the destruction of his old certainties, and

to the recognition that events shatter expectations, and destroy complacency and security. Moreover, he discovers, his assumptions about others have stemmed from his own beliefs and categories, and have not been based on clear understanding. As events unfold in the mind of the protagonists so do they illuminate the protagonists to the reader. The movement inward is rendered in terms of the manner in which each central character deals with experience. This is the mid-passage of the journey.

The third chapter describes the efforts of the protagonists to adapt to a world which is different from the world of their preconceived ideas. In order to do so they must effect a dramatic shift in perspective. The direction of that exertion is towards a re-evaluation of definitions. The old categories are inappropriate, and the central character feels their insufficiency as a refutation of old certainties. A new system of values must be created. Each character succeeds in achieving this goal to the extent that he is capable of re-arranging his perspectives. Every new accommodation, however, is tentative. Though journey's end lies in death, while one lives each journey's end is a new accommodation.

Each chief character is generously endowed with energy of the spirit, and though each manages his energies differently--sometimes in initiation of activity and

sometimes in response--it is through the consciousness of the central characters that the action which makes the novel move is generated.

## NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Leon Edel, The Conquest of London (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1962), p. 33.
2. Ibid.
3. R.W.B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 55.
4. Henry James, The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James ed. R.P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 308. Further references to this work will be to AN.
5. F.O. Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 32.
6. Edel, p. 55.
7. Lyall H. Powers, Henry James's Major Novels: Essays in Criticism (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1973), p. xv.
8. James, The Art of the Novel, p. 54.
9. The American, introd. J.W. Beach (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1949); The Portrait of a Lady, ed. by Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963); The Aspern Papers and The Spoils of Poynton, introd. by R.P. Blackmur (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1959); The Ambassadors, ed. by S.P. Rosenbaum (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. Inc., 1964); The Golden Bowl, ed. and with an afterword by John Halperin (New York: Popular Library. Reprinted by arrangement with the World Publishing Company. No date given.) All further references will be to the editions cited and will be incorporated into the text of the thesis. The textual notes will adopt the following abbreviations of the titles: The American: American; Portrait of a Lady: Portrait; The Spoils of Poynton: Spoils; The Ambassadors: Ambassadors; The Golden Bowl: G.B.
10. Dorothea Krook, The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 1.

## CHAPTER I

### Possibilities and Limitations: The Departure

In the earliest James novel under discussion The American, the protagonist's name tells us something significant. In speaking of Christopher Newman's name, William J. Maseychik says, "Christopher for the explorer, adventurer and discoverer, Columbus; and Newman for the innocent Adamic man."<sup>1</sup>

When we meet him at the beginning of the book he is taking his ease while "staring at Murillo's beautiful moon borne Madonna." (American, p. 1).<sup>2</sup> His is the position of a vigorous man temporarily ceasing from activity. He had "flung down beside him . . ." (p. 1) his guide book and glass, and "he was not a man to whom fatigue was familiar." (p. 1) Also, he is looking at a representation of man's desiring, at the picture of one of his most compelling myths, the Madonna. Without mentioning his name James invokes a strong sense of power in the physical presence and actions of Newman, and tells us that he is clever and competent as well: "His physiognomy would have sufficiently indicated that he was a shrewd and capable fellow." (p. 1) However, even though he is able to work all night "over a bristling bundle of accounts" (p. 1) he

is tired by Titian and Rubens. Newman is shown as a kind of archetypal American, sprung full blown from the continent of America, without known antecedents, with a name which is symbolic. His intelligence and his confidence, as well as his vast riches are the means by which he hopes to reach out for, explore and acquire, the goods of Europe. Mrs. Tristram calls him the "great Western Barbarian, stepping forth in his innocence and might, gazing a while at this poor effete Old World, and then swooping down on it." (American p. 31)

But the masters weary him. The only personal datum given in the early description of Newman is that he was "inspired . . . for the first time in his life, with a vague sense of self-mistrust." (American, p. 2) Thus James confronts us with a type rather than an individual. We know by his description how very American Newman is, almost a stereotype. Viola Hopkins, in commenting on this scene in her article "Visual Art Devices in Henry James," says, "In one sharp visual image the theme of America confronting Europe is presented with immediacy and economy."<sup>3</sup>

Obviously Newman is attempting something completely new for him. He is endeavoring to understand something not by way of the rational faculty, which serves him so well in understanding accounts, nor by way of the methods of business which involves bargaining and keen judgment, but by means of the eye, by "seeing", which encompasses aesthetic

knowledge and appreciation, and the reflective faculty as yet new and untried. Newman is used to acting, not meditating. His ventures into the Louvre are the beginning of feeling, and he says, "'The fact is I have never had time to feel things. I have had to do them, to make myself felt.'" (American, p. 30)

Newman is entering a new realm of experience. He is hampered in his efforts to understand it because he is "guilty of the damning fault (as we have lately discovered it to be) of confounding the merit of the artist with that of his work . . . for he admires the squinting Madonna of the young lady with the boyish coiffure because he thinks the young lady herself uncommonly taking." (American, p. 3)

At the beginning of his journey we find that Newman is indiscriminating. He will buy Noémie Nioche's execrable imitations of the masters because she is pretty. Thus, when we first meet him his standards of value are determined by superficial and inappropriate criteria. He wants to see, in order to know the world, but he is not interested in the values which belong to the world of inner sight. He wants to learn, but not change, not to be dislocated by knowledge. In fact, "He had not only a dislike, but a sort of moral mistrust, of uncomfortable thoughts, and it was both uncomfortable and slightly contemptible to feel obliged to square one's self with a standard. One's standard was the ideal of one's own good-humored prosperity, and



prosperity which enabled one to give as well as take."

(p. 61)

It is Christopher's eye which sets the tone for his story, "an eye in which innocence and experience were singularly blended." (p. 30) Appropriately, his mentor in Paris is Mrs. Tristram who bears the same name as the young knight who suffered lust of the eyes.<sup>4</sup> Leon Edel considers that "James's mature belief [is] that life is a process of seeing, and through awareness the attaining of understanding."<sup>5</sup> Though Edel here refers to The Ambassadors, a much later work, we can see in The American the early connection, the notion of "seeing" and "understanding" being one and the same.

F.O. Matthiessen writes, "An interesting chapter of cultural history could be written about the nineteenth century's stress on sight. When Emerson declared that 'the age is ocular,' and delighted in the fact that the poet is the seer, he was overwhelmingly concerned with the spiritual and not the material vision. But concern with the external world came to mark every phase of the century's scientific achievement."<sup>6</sup> James's metaphor is both immediate, in terms of his times, and universal in the sense that we understand what it means to see beyond the surface and into the meaning of things. His use of ocular imagery extends to other characters in the work. Claire's eyes were "at once brilliant and mild," "soft and luminous,"

(American, p. 59) and finally, towards the end "like two rainy autumn moons." (p. 271) The Marquise has cold, blue eyes, of course. Newman begins by desiring all that is pleasing to his eyes. But what the eye sees also enters the mind as an image, and works its own influence there.

Newman has become dissatisfied with his own world and apprehends that there is another way of living. His intimation of this knowledge comes to him when he is no longer interested in avenging himself on a business competitor who has injured him. The very act of traveling to Europe is the Jamesian way of describing Newman's wish to change his state, to seek new givens. While Newman, as all of us, is not readily able to analyze of just what his own world of "donnees"<sup>7</sup> consists, he is perceptive about the world of others. Of the Marquise he thinks, "her world is the world of things immutably decreed. But how she is at home in it, and what a paradise she finds it! She walks about in it as if it were a blooming park, a Garden of Eden; and when she sees 'This is genteel,' or 'This is improper,' written on a mile-stone she stops ecstatically, as if she were listening to a nightingale or smelling a rose." (American, p. 127) The Marquise de Bellegarde, in her Garden, sees even more than Newman realizes. She sees the comfort of an order, a timeless hierarchy, a "place" for everyone and everything. She does not wish to change the stillness of her world; indeed

she is immured in the world of the immutable.

Newman does seek a change, albeit a comfortable one. He has begun to move out of his former patterns of response and action. During his travels in Europe he has found a world of beauty which somehow corresponds to his beautiful action in eschewing revenge: "It had come back to him simply that what he had been looking at all summer was a very rich and beautiful world, and that it had not all been made by sharp railroad men and stockbrokers."

(American, p. 71)

Being a man ready for a wife, he establishes a woman for his focal point in this new world. His approach is business-like but unsophisticated. Prior to touring the continent he has spoken to Mrs. Tristram of a wife in terms of a purchase, "'I want to possess, in a word, the best article in the market.'" (American, p. 34) S. Gorley Putt comments in this context that "With all his mercantile shrewdness, there is in this careful first presentation of Newman a sense of the inappropriate skills of a fish out of water, which in the Parisian world he now sets out to conquer do indeed reduce him to an unconscious 'guileless integrity'."<sup>8</sup> Yet, he is also a romantic, perhaps something of a knight errant, for when he speaks to Valentin of his sister, he says, "'She is my dream realized.'" (American, p. 109) This modern knight errant quests after his dream so that he may purchase it, not earn it in the old ways.

It is interesting in this context to note that young Valentin is described as "a page in a romance," a suitable adjunct to the squiredom of Mrs. Tristram. Thus the conventions of knight errantry are signalled by James.

As Newman travels through Europe, counting the places he visits, he might be investigating and cataloguing a new garden which he hopes to enjoy. And all the while he thinks, "If he wanted to see more of the world might he not find it in Claire de Cintré's eyes?" (American, p. 70) Newman's idea of Europe comes to be embodied in Claire, in the beauty of her eyes, while in actual fact the garden of forms which is the Europe of Madame de Bellegarde is also an aspect of Europe with which he will have to deal. His readiness for new experience is expressed in his journey from America to Europe and in his travels throughout Europe. He wishes to enter and possess this world, and this desire to make himself felt, to penetrate this world, will come into conflict with a society which values the changeless, the everlasting, and which evicts intruders. Experience for Newman will be an enlargement of the orb, the orb of the eye and of his world which he encompasses with the faculty of sight. As he travels in the realms of experience his inner eye will be opened.

Newman wishes to make himself felt. Indeed he is used to it. In The Portrait of a Lady, Isabel Archer has no conscious idea of altering others' lives, though she

wishes to aggrandize her own. At the beginning she enters the first garden as a stranger come only to enjoy it as long as she may. The name "Gardencourt exudes a mood of mellow reciprocity between the civilised and the natural," says Tony Tanner in his essay on Portrait entitled "The Fearful Self."<sup>9</sup> There is, however, an anomaly in first seeing Isabel, whose surname Archer suggests the chaste Diana, and who is clothed in black, entering the Eden-like atmosphere, complete with animals and a would-be Adam in the person of Lord Warburton. Isabel is no daughter of the morning, for she enters after the light has reached its height, and she is clothed in darkness. J.C. Rowe, in his discussion in Henry Adams and Henry James totally denies any element of irony or paradox in this scene by stating that "Mr. Touchett has purchased a dead little world. The waning afternoon reflects not only the old bankers' impending death, but Ralph's fatal illness."<sup>10</sup> Rowe's analysis leaves out the whole question of the chief character in the work, Isabel herself. Isabel wants to move in "a realm of light," (Portrait, p. 53) and in her depths "lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely . . ." (Portrait, p. 55) But it is part of Isabel's struggles that this image is, for her, "too formidable to be attractive." (p. 55) At the outset of her journey there is a sense of discrepancy and contradiction accompanying Isabel. James maintains this dissentience