

Philip Horne, 'An element of the cruel: What Henry James found when he went back to America', *TLS*, 18 June 2021

(Review of Peter Collister, ed., Henry James, *The American Scene*, Cambridge University Press, 2019)

In 1907, Henry James published *The American Scene*, an extraordinary, uncategorizable book of – travel impressions? “Comparative sociology” (James’s term)? Restless analysis? (He repeatedly describes himself in it as “the restless analyst”.) W. H. Auden, in 1946, hailed it as a “prose poem”; Leon Edel, in 1968, called it “this brilliant and disquieting portrait of a society ‘dancing, all consciously, on the thin crust of a volcano’”, a vital document for “Americans concerned with self-evaluation”. Peter Collister’s thumping new scholarly edition, following his editions of James’s autobiographies (2011) and *Complete Writings on Art and Drama* (2016), presents James’s often vivid and often challenging book as “a major work from his final, most adventurous creative phase”.

When he arrived in August 1904, the sixty-one-year-old James had not visited his homeland in twenty-one years: his long-time antagonist Theodore Roosevelt (who had in 1894 called him “a miserable little snob” – and who would entertain him at the White House) was now President; since the Spanish–American War of 1898, American Imperialism was being spoken of (Henry’s brother William was one of the leaders of the Anti-Imperialist league); vast numbers of immigrants, Italian, Jewish, German, Armenian, had been added to the national melting-pot; and, via huge urban, industrial and financial expansion, the Trusts (corporations) had come to dominate American life. The return took some courage: James was a much-vilified figure in the press, a target for cruel mockery in the ongoing culture wars.

But James could give as good as he got. The book laments the decline of values “not merely estimable in more or less greasy greenbacks”, while searching America for a sense of “other possibilities in man than the mere possibility of getting the better of his fellow-man over a ‘trade’”. The idea was to gather impressions, to assess empirically the textures of a civilization being shaped by “the monstrous form of Democracy” and by the general “American postulate or basis” of “active pecuniary gain and active pecuniary gain only”. Although James did get to California (see my “Sense of the West”, *TLS*, September 21, 2018), and intended a

sequel, the book we have spends a third of its time in “the New York phantasmagoria”, and stays East, ending in Florida.

James relishes American nature in Newport and New England, but sees the dominant strain of American culture as based on the repudiation of history – on “the ceaseless relegation of the previous (on the part of the whole visible order) to one of the wan categories of misery”. The autobiographical side of his experience as a “repatriated absentee” mostly leads to “a horrible, hateful sense of personal antiquity”, as when he searches in Washington Place for what he calls “the rudely, the ruthlessly suppressed birth-house” and feels “amputated of half my history”. But it is not just personal: the New York skyscrapers are “simply the most piercing notes in that concert of the expensively provisional into which your supreme sense of New York resolves itself”; in terms of the built environment, James finds “the new landmarks crushing the old quite as violent children stamp on snails and caterpillars”. Where there is a church, it lacks civic authority, so that it looks “for the most part no more established or seated than a stopped omnibus”; the garish mansions of Newport (now tourist traps) are “white elephants”.

James sees a population trapped in a state of false consciousness. In one Florida hotel, “I seemed to see ... the whole housed populace move as in mild and consenting suspicion of its captured and governed state”. Scorning the faked-up literary and artistic “romantic local past of costume and compliment and sword-play and gallantry and passion”, he declares that the deluded American public “fairly goes upon its knees to be humbuggingly humbugged”. “Under the icy breath of Trusts and the weight of the new remorseless monopolies that operate as no madresses of ancient personal power thrilling us on the historic page ever operated”, moreover, there will be “such a thing, in the United States, it is hence to be inferred, as freedom to grow up to be blighted, and it may be the only freedom in store for the smaller fry of future generations”. At such thrillingly resonant moments, James’s political vision, often charged with tragic historical ironies, opens up startling perspectives on the genocide of Native Americans, the political corruption of American cities and the scale of the ugliness which America is imposing on Nature. Collister could have given more weight, in fact, to James’s forceful political and social analysis (amid his plethora of notes, for instance, he nowhere offers one on the power of the Trusts, a major issue of the time).

This edition represents a daunting amount of work, and is full of things to be grateful for in coming to terms with this difficult, self-reflexive, controversial book – which James’s often critical brother William called “in its peculiar way ... supremely great”. At its most relevant, Collister’s apparatus is enlightening as well

as informative. When James complains in the capital of the South in the Civil War that there is a dearth of “legend” in “the melancholy streets of Richmond”, though there may be more “in all the blood-drenched radius”, Collister notes for us that “Whether or not James recalled this, his brother, Bob (Robertson), had, as a part of the 19th Army Corps, been part of the attack on Fort Gilmer, just 7 miles outside Richmond”. This is poignantly suggestive. Collister can be a fussy, overinsistent guide; his annotations go far beyond the factual into the interpretative, citing dozens of others’ critical works as well as his own. Sentences of late James are often hard enough to follow without being interrupted by, in one egregious case, three note-markers (seventy-nine words of James, over 400 of Collister). But the core of valuable research here is a serious achievement.

The American Scene tackles what are, in our time, some sensitive areas, and James’s racial politics certainly lack twenty-first-century sensitivities – he doesn’t seem to imagine himself addressing Black, Jewish, or Native American readers – and we should be made uncomfortable by many of his meditations on race, both in the New York Ghetto, and in the South. But his complex, shifting views, even if we decide to pronounce him “racist”, are surely not just, as Collister is quick to concede, “standard for the time”; James is responding with an understandable mixture of wounded dispossession and flexible openness to an era of mass immigration, wondering if a coherent civilization can emerge. He seems at least to have been a strong Abolitionist; his younger brothers fought and suffered in the Civil War. Bitterness against the South and its “project, extravagant, fantastic, and to-day pathetic in its folly, of a vast Slave State”, saturates the book. In Richmond’s Confederate Museum James talks to “a gallant and nameless, as well as a very handsome, young Virginian”, proud of his family’s bloody war service, and finds that “though he wouldn’t have hurt a Northern fly, there were things (ah, we had touched on some of these!) that, all fair, engaging, smiling, as he stood there, he would have done to a Southern negro”. This (concluding a section) seems potently nuanced and angry.

It is finally James’s imaginative and stylistic responsiveness and wit, and the usually rewarding challenge of following his thought, that keep drawing readers to *The American Scene*. The remembered sound of near-empty New York summer streets is “the long, the perpendicular rattle, as of buckets, forever thirsty, in the bottomless well of fortune”; New York’s Bay beautifully calls up for him “the tone, predominantly, of summer dawns and winter frosts, of sea-foam, of bleached sails and stretched awnings, of blanched hulls, of scoured decks, of new ropes, of polished brasses, of streamers clear in the blue air”. The Washington Capitol is

remarkable for its “monumental spittoons”, and the too-bourgeois city is best when the spring leaves come and it is clothed by nature: “the national capital is charming in proportion as you don’t see it”. Although he tries to be kind, James repeatedly finds that such judgements cannot be avoided: for, as he says, “there is in all contemplation, there is even in any clear appreciation, an element of the cruel”. Much of the interest – indeed, the comedy – of *The American Scene* lies in James’s attempts to find appreciative things to say about his American impressions. Even if he doesn’t do all he heroically sets out to, in the attempt he produces a bracing, mercurial, quite dazzling book, one which remains unique and still valuable in its reflections on the American experiment.