

SZEGED SERIES IN AMERICAN STUDIES I

REVISITING THE PAST

AMERICAN CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT



EDITED BY
IRÉN ANNUS AND ÁGNES ZSÓFIA KOVÁCS



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Contents

Introduction

Irén Annus and Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

Queer Eye on the Rise: Hegemonic Masculinity Confirmed

Irén Annus

Neo-Western to the Rescue: Breaking Bad and the Crisis of
Hegemonic Masculinity

Irén Annus

Crossways of Film and American Studies

Réka M. Cristian

Gourmet Adventures: Film, Adaptation, and Cooking

Réka M. Cristian

Do People Dream of Digital Archives?

Zoltán Dragon

Remembering Henry James: Paris, Perspective and Panic in A Small
Boy and Others

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

The Business of Marriage: Clashing American and French Roles for
Turn-of-the-century Married Women in Edith Wharton

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

Mae West Turning Dirty Snow White through her Comic Performances

Zsófia Anna Tóth

Works Cited

Merida and her Mother Bear: Feminist Cultural Pedagogy á la
Disney/Pixar

Zsófia Anna Tóth

The Power of Hemispheric Sympathy: Sentimental Aspects of Thomas
Jefferson's Conception of Inter-American Relations

Zoltán Vajda

Contributors

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Irén Annus and Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

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Irén Annus

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REMEMBERING HENRY JAMES: PARIS, PERSPECTIVE AND PANIC IN *A SMALL BOY* AND *OTHERS*

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

2016 marked the centenary of Henry James's death, so the James industry was buzzing with publications of and about the Master's work that culminated in a new edition of his autobiographies. James wrote two and a half volumes of autobiography in the four years before his death in 1916. The reception of the autobiographies normally views the volumes as texts which fit organically into James's work, being part of James's late nonfiction production that carries on the aesthetic logic of his late novels. However, critics differ on is what this aesthetic logic might be like. The differences of critical opinion are connected to distinguishable trails of critical traditions. There are at least four such trails: Freudian, Poststructuralist decentering, philosophically oriented, and gender studies based. The aim of this paper is to investigate the issue of homosexual panic at the intersection of two of these methods: by combining formal and gender studies concerns, I wish to review how the formal issue of Jamesian perspective is linked to the process of gendering and rejecting a homosexual subject position in *A Small Boy*. First, the idea of scenic representation is presented as the core element of a Jamesian artistic sensitivity. Second, I review processes of gender identifications that happen in given scenes of the life story. I argue that one central scene, that of the hallucinative dream in the Louvre at the end of the narrative, can be interpreted not as one about the artist's renunciation of the world but as one about a typical nineteenth-century male homosexual panic, similar to homosexual panic in "The Beast in the Jungle."⁶

Keywords: Henry James, Paris, autobiography, biography, scenic perspective, affect, homosexual panic, *A Small Boy and Others*, "The Beast in the Jungle"

Proema

2016 marked the centennial of Henry James's death and it came with an outpouring of James-related publications reflecting on his work and his memory. Just to indicate some: Cambridge University Press are producing new editions of James's texts, in 2016 James's *Complete Writings on Art and Drama* was published, edited by Peter Collister. The parallel venture by the Library of America published James's *Autobiographies*, edited by Philip Horne. Oxford University Press published Oliver Herford's *Henry James's Style of Retrospect* on James's late nonfiction. Michael Anesko edited *Travels with Henry James* for the occasion. Simultaneously, a string of articles offered tribute to the Master and his memory including Louis Menand and Adam Gopnik in the *New Yorker*, Colm Tóibín in *The Guardian*, Leo Robson in the *New Statesman*, a Podcast in the *TLS*, again just to mention a few. From the perspective of Jamesian autobiography and biography this means a new wave of interest in portraying the Master. At a moment in criticism when the methods of writing biography are seriously under debate, not to mention the lack of belief in facts, these articles provide overviews of James's legacy in combination with insights into his critical reception.

In David McWhirter's *Henry James in Context* Sheila Teahan seems surprised to find herself writing about James autobiographies and biographies in 2010. Her (our) poststructuralist schooling would defy a belief in facts, and indeed she highlights that James himself finished *A Small Boy and Others* with the word "gap" (Teahan 2010, 62) as part of the modernist novelist's concern with the impossibility of autobiography (Maunsell 2018, 3). Then she criticizes early biographers who relied heavily on the autobiographies and "assumed them to be history" (Teahan 2010, 63) and also those who took it the continuity between life and fiction for granted (ibid.). She summarizes the story of James's implied sexuality in the biographies to showcase the ever changeable forms biography can take. – As if providing an explicit further example for Teahan, Michael Anesko's *Monopolising the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship* tells the story of how Leon Edel's monopoly of writing about James's life resulted in the censoring of its homoerotic subtext (Anesko 2012). Based on thorough archival research, Anesko shows how the politics of scholarship forcefully formulated a mythical narrative about James's life. At the same time, it makes one wonder what other narratives may possibly lie buried among the notes in the archives.

In 2016, the Library of America published James's *Autobiographies* in Philip Horne's edition which provided many readers an occasion for remembering

Henry James. The edition contained not only the three (two and a half) volumes of James's autobiographies but also eight other related reminiscences (Horne (ed.) 2016). Adam Gopnik reflected on the new edition by focusing on James' image of James the boy and through this on James's evocation of the imaginative mind in his novels (Gopnik 2016). Similarly, Leo Robson used the new edition to reconsider James's relation to the "real," a central concept of his artistic vision. This concept appears much more problematic for James's modernist mind than many would suppose (Robson 2016). Conversely, Colm Tóibín's reaction to the edition is an overview of the adventures of James' biography through references to Anesko's account of the scandal in the James archive. Tóibín credits Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick whose work in the 1990s provided a framework of reading that transformed James from the distant master into a contemporary spirit (Tóibín 2016).

The essay below is an attempt to use the notion of homosexual panic by Sedgwick for the analysis of a key scene in James's *A Small Boy and Others*, a formative dream about the Louvre and Paris as part of the narrator's search for self-definition.

Introduction

Henry James wrote two and a half volumes of autobiography in the four years before his death in 1916.⁷ This was the time when he could complete no new novels any more, when he had finished his American travelogue *The American Scene* and had composed the *Prefaces* to the New York edition of his work. All was completed and not selling well, and the lack of popular interest threw James into bulges of depression. As a way to resist the ebb of creativity, critical opinion says, the autobiographies of 1913-1916 tell the story or emergence of the artist as a young man. In particular, the first volume, *A Small Boy and Others* represents how the perspective of the budding artist came into being in the 1850s.

The reception of the autobiographies normally views the volumes as texts which fit organically into James's work, being part of James's late nonfiction production that carries on the aesthetic logic of his late novels. What critics differ on is what this aesthetic logic might be like. The differences of critical opinion are connected to distinguishable trails of critical traditions: to my mind, there are at least four such trails.

First, the most populous route is the Freudian psychoanalytic direction set by Leon Edel with various later variations. Edel's name is tied to James studies, his lifelong work as a critic and biographer of James defined and monopolized James studies for decades. Edel's popular psycho-biographies of James tell the

story of the author who renounced life for art, the life of the personal relations for the life of the mind. In this overarching interpretation art stands for a Jamesian method of composition that is closely linked to James's experiments in writing drama and producing dramatic performances in and around 1895 (Edel 1978 and Kovács 2007). For Edel the biographer James's own autobiographies illustrate the emergence of the Jamesian interest in consciousness and also represent his own life in ways his novels represent his characters: through omissions and silences. Carol Holly expands on Edel's biographical method when she investigates how family scheme structures relations among members of the extended James family (Buchholtz 2014, 90). Until the 1990s, the autobiographies did not interest literary scholars unless as part of the Jamesian major phase and as an area where the application of techniques can be demonstrated. From this angle, James the author is usually presented as a Jamesian hero "who utilizes newly gained insight into some ethically meaningful action" (Hoffa 1979, 289).

The second route is constituted by poststructuralist reinterpretations of unifying readings of Jamesian procedures through focusing on the ambiguities of rhetorical and hermeneutic processes in James. Paul John Eakin problematizes the alleged referential function of autobiography and goes on to show how this is manifest in James's account of the emergence of his creative faculty (Eakin 1988, 680). Collin Meissner shows how what he calls the Jamesian negative hermeneutics is present in the *Autobiographies*. For Meissner, negative hermeneutics in James "comes down to an understanding of his conception of experience as a fundamentally negative process through which one's subjectivity is constantly being breached and reconstructed anew" (Meissner 1999, 187), and he claims there is a parallel between James's fictional consciousness and his autobiographical one (Meissner 1999, 199).

Mirosława Buchholtz investigates the terms of an auto/biographical p/act between James and his readers in the three texts. She refabricates Lejeune's idea of the autobiographical contract for the case of James with the guidance of Paul de Man. Lejeune argues that autobiographies are referential texts. What constitutes and justifies autobiography is an autobiographical pact between author and reader that the information provided by the autobiography is to be verified by the reader. De Man draws on this position to explain that autobiography demonstrates the impossibility of creating a totalizing self-image through "all textual systems made up of topological substitutions," therefore autobiography and biography are difficult to distinguish. To the idea of the contract he adds that autobiography is not only referential but is also contractual, grounded in speech act. Buchholtz maintains

that biography and autobiography are no longer regarded as genres that can be defined but as a discourse of identity and representation, hence the first slash, auto/biography, in her central term (Buchholtz 2014, 21). She also accepts that what constitutes and justifies auto/biography is an autobiographical pact between author and reader about the reader's role to verify the autographical value of a text. The reader, she says however, may not be aware of the writer's auto/biographical act inscribed in the writing, so she calls the pact the 'p/act' with a slash, so that critical readers keep in mind the performative element of the process of writing (16). From this perspective, James's auto/biographical texts become identity narratives in which the margin between Henry's and William's identities become blurred and the exegete is to map.

In a similar vein, Tamara Follini integrates a formally oriented reading of James with a poststructuralist interest in the workings of the past when she reads James's late texts dealing with the past (including the autobiographies). She claims that James's two roles around which many of his self-definitions cluster, the historian and the dramatist are rarely oppositional (Follini 2000, 110). She reads "James's conception of history as an entity compiled of multiple viewpoints, and of an individual's personal history as incorporating versions of experience, each of which attempts to express the meanings latent in any given occurrence (Follini 2000, 121). In the autobiographies she analyzes a series of self-defining scenes in which various combinations of elements (solitude, enclosure, sickness, far, aggression) construct and reconstruct personal history (Cristian 2006). These, similarly to other auto/biographies or self-writings of the time, tend to reflect traditional patriarchal world order and convey heteronormative male-centric perspectives that make use of the past to communicate in the present (Annus 2005, 16-17). One can add, however, that the fissures within such a state of mind are visible in the attitude of such heteronormative male thinkers of the early-nineteenth century as Thomas Jefferson, who argued for the need to break with the past among generations of Americans, including most conspicuously, Native Americans – in the spirit of modernization (Vajda 2019).

Thirdly, there is a philosophically oriented way to approach the autobiographies that emphasizes the Pragmatist background to James's venture. Richard Poirier's articles on James remind readers of the link to William's thinking that escapes the attention of Tanner when he focuses on "style" in Jamesian nonfiction (Poirier 1995) and also eludes Edel when he misreads James's tropes and reduces biographical study to family calendar (Poirier 1963, 599) instead of paying attention to "historical and essentially ideological matters" (Poirier 1963, 598). Poirier maintains that in his memoirs

James performs a posthumous bow to his brother William about being in essential philosophical agreement with him. Henry's sensuous education is to be compared to William's idea of 'troping,' "the 'turning' of words from already established meanings so that they include additional and more flexible ones" (Poirier 2002). Free characters in James are able to perform this while fixed ones are not, their dramatic conflict structures the plots. The fictitious hero of the autobiographies learns this method that despite the technical term precludes premeditated procedures (ibid.). Ross Posnock takes up this line of thought when he compares the affinities between the two brothers' thinking. He investigates their thinking as versions of what he names the 'politics of nonidentity,' i. e. the disruption of the compulsion to fix identity, to reveal their ambiguous relationship to modernity (Posnock 1991, 16 and 170).

Fourthly, the gender studies reassessment of technologies of gender at work in James's literary production debate the easy identifications implied in readings by Edel and co. In her overview on Jamesian auto/biographies, Mirosława Buchholtz contends that there are two distinctly different ways to treat James's homoeroticism in life writing about James. Biographers like Kaplan and Novick "focus on suppressed homosexual desire as the source of constant anxiety" (Buchholtz 2014, 63) as a way to take issue with Edel's representation of a possible Jamesian homoeroticism. In contrast, literary scholars like Eric Haralson, Wendy Graham, and Leland Person view the issue "in the larger context of social pressure," (ibid.) discuss contemporary historical contexts of the representation of gender and sexuality in James, and survey the normative script of masculinity that James defied by remaining a bachelor artist.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the issue of homosexual panic at the intersection of two methods outlined above. Similarly to Follini's combination of formal and poststructuralist concerns in the autobiographies, I wish to review how the formal issue of Jamesian perspective is linked to the process of gendering and rejecting a homosexual subject position in *A Small Boy*. On the one hand, by Jamesian perspective I mean the specific process of the "scenic perspective" that is described in the text as the result of the (aesthetically) sensuous education process the James brothers undergo in their early years. The theme of the scenic perspective is introduced as the heart of the young James's artistic education. The educational process is directed to the emergence and extension of a sensibility that is basically visual. The idea of scenic representation is presented here as the core element of a Jamesian artistic sensitivity. The scenic perspective also functions as a method of representation in the text because the story of the young artist evolves

through a string of mental pictures elaborated on. More specifically, there is a list of self-defining scenes all critical accounts enumerate: two illnesses and a hallucinative dream. On the other hand, by gendering I mean the processes of gender identifications that happen in given scenes of the life story. I argue that one central scene, that of the hallucinative dream in the Louvre at the end of the narrative, can be interpreted not as one about the artist's renunciation of the world but as one about a typical 19th century male homosexual panic. If one reads Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of homosexual panic in "The Beast in the Jungle" along with *A Small Boy*, the parallels become marked.

In order to substantiate this reading, the first part of the paper surveys the idea of artistic education put forward in the text. The second part describes the theme of scenic perspective represented in the account, while the third analyzes the actual use of the scenic perspective in the hallucination scene that, I argue, is represented as a case of nineteenth century male homosexual panic.

1. James's sensuous education

James's three autobiographies narrate the story of a Jamesian sensibility which functions as the source of Jamesian creativity. *The Small Boy and Others* recounts the story of how the James brothers, William and Henry were educated until Henry's twelfth year.

Educational institutions play an insignificant role in the brothers' education of sensibility. Planned instruction, as James puts it, confronts them rarely. As the James family spent long stretches of time in Europe that interrupted the flow of their New York residence, about a score of educational institutions and even some remarkable pedagogues are mentioned in the volume. These commentaries refer to the characters of the teachers and the atmosphere of the schools, not to what was taught in them, because what was taught in the institutions had no effect on the brothers. Instead, museums, theaters, and family gatherings are pointed out as the locations where "important things" were indeed learnt.

It is the emergence of a general sensibility that is shown to be important, a sensibility that is also named variously as 'style' and 'taste' later on. At the outset, the education is only of sensibility in general: a quickened sensibility (James 2001, 149)⁸ that comes from walking, dawdling and watching, from activities seemingly useless for the outsider.

A spectacular site of the education of this sensibility is the Museum of the Louvre. Here the vast collection of pictures makes the young spectators aware of a mysterious connection among pictures, that pictures have a bewildering

and overwhelming effect on the spectator. “We were not yet aware of style, though on the way to become so, but were aware of mystery, which indeed was one of its forms” (180), James comments. He adds: “in those beginnings I felt myself most happily cross the bridge over to style constituted by the wondrous Gallerie d’Apollon “ (180) “a tunnel trough which I inhaled little by little, ... a general sense of glory. The glory meant ever so many things at once, not only beauty and art and supreme design, but history and fame and power, the world in fine raised to the richest and noblest expression ... the galerie became for years what I can only term a splendid scene of things” (181). The Louvre is visited regularly, its effect “educative, formative, fertilizing, in a degree which no other ‘intellectual experience’ our youth was to know could pretend, as a comprehensive, conductive thing, to rival” (182). Summing up the issue of their education, the James brothers agree that “[W]e never picked up an education” but a social and historical sensibility instead (183). Henry James labels the kind of knowledge they did acquire as a derivative kind of intensity (198), not the one characteristic of the time of speaking, to which he refers to as an immediate kind of intensity.

2. The scenic perspective of space

The education of the Jamesian sensibility takes on a visual form. One may even call the emergence of this sensibility the emergence of a visual sensibility. The narrator offers mental pictures of persons and situations represented and he is commenting on these pictures in the storytelling. One example of this mental picture phenomenon is the case of the daguerreotype of Henry James and his father Henry James, Sr. (which usually appears on the cover of *A Small Boy* when it comes as a separate volume). Henry Jr. remembers going to the salon of the photographer with his father, also the jacket he wore, the room, the photographer. He adds that his jacket was also commented on by a visitor, Thackeray, in his father’s library. Thackeray was clearly startled by the number and size of young Henry’s buttons and remarked that in England he would be called Buttons. The bewildered Henry was to remember this comment as something impudent done on his part without him noticing, an impression that what he thinks is normal can be strange for someone coming from a different country.

The problem of how pictures represent something underlies the series of mental pictures offered and analyzed in the text. This problem comes up in an early encounter with paintings on Italy early on in the text. In his own home, James is inspecting paintings in the salon with friends of the house. A painting by Thomas Cole (the American Turner) depicts Florence, in which not an

object represented stands out (James does not remember the title). Then, in another room the family has another Italian landscape, this one by M. Lefèvre that is represented in frank, rich colors: a so called view in Tuscany, a rural scene with ruins and peasants. A friend of the house criticizes the Lefèvre asking: “Are you sure it is Tuscany?” (141) James’s father adds: “Oh in Tuscany, you know, the colors are much softer – there would be a certain haze in the atmosphere” (141), to which James the child himself adds: “Why of course I’d say the softness and haze of our Florence there, isn’t Florence in Tuscany?” (141). After that incident the whole family is facing a dilemma: if Florence was like they all conveniently remembered, then Lefèvre could not be; yet if Lefèvre had Florence right, then their “old convenience,” their idea of Florence could not be. (141) This causes a problem to ponder on and to be checked later in Italy – with the added problem of *what* Lefèvre had painted if it was to turn out that the family (and Cole) had Tuscany right. In other words, James’s education through pictures projects the problem of visual representation to him on a practical level, before the critical concepts for the problem actually appear.

As another source of the practical initiation to the problem of representation, James relies on his experience of the dramatic form. The key concept of the scenic perspective comes from James’s education in the theater. We learn that he goes to the theater very often, and chapters of the book are dedicated to his experience of Broadway and of the French theater in his early years. We learn that he even begins to write dramas with the aid of quarto sheets of ruled paper. “Luckily, each fourth page of the folded sheet he used was left blank. ... When the drama itself had covered three pages the last one over which I most laboured, served for the illustration of what I had verbally presented. Every scene had thus its explanatory picture, and as each act, would have had its climax” (136). Scenes were more important than the stories themselves. “Scenes being the root of the matter, ... especially when they flowered at every pretext into the very optic and perspective of the stage, where boards diverged correctly, from a central point of vision... straight down to the footlights” (136).

James the narrator goes on to link this perspective to his later work at once: “whereas my cultivation of the picture was maintained, my practice of the play, my addiction to scenes, presently quite dropped. I was capable of learning the express ideas in scenes, and was not capable.... of making pictures. The picture appealed to me all my days, I was only slow to recognize the sort that would appeal to me most” (137) – he comments. As a child, he begins to see and render situations in writing according to dramatic

conventions, applying even the centralizing perspective of the stage when setting up his situations, a way of vision I will refer to as the 'scenic perspective'.

3. Paris, the Louvre, and gendering the hallucination scene

The method of the scenic perspective we have seen is not only described but is also applied in *A Small Boy and Others*. All critical accounts of the book list a string of self-forming scenes that allegedly represent the steps in James's artistic education: Broadway in NYC, his malaria in London, his typhus in Boulogne, his visits to the Louvre. In the third section of the essay, I focus on one of these formative scenes, that of the hallucination in the Louvre in order to analyze the use of the scenic perspective in it.

The hallucination in the Louvre is usually presented as a key scene in the emergence of James's visual sensibility (see below). When commenting on the 'Taste' he learnt in the Salon, James tells the story of a subsequent nightmare that took place in the Salon. In the dream, a dim sinister figure attacks James who is alone in the Salon. James manages to resist the attack by keeping the double door firmly shut with pushing the weight of his own body against it. The ferocity of the resistance threatens the dim figure who in turn flees along the corridor.

Carol Holly's article on the reception of the Jamesian autobiographies highlights the fact that contemporary critics did not comment on the dream, only post-Freudian critics began to see it as centrally important, a scene that defines James's essential psychology as the artist renouncing the world (Holly 1985, 575). Even today, critics consider it as the artist's willful self-assertion, a victory over the figures harrasing the imagination, the self-assertion of the budding artist (Perosa 2002, 18-9). In 2008 Hugh Stevens suggested the scene also had a strong erotic element, and the identification with the male ghost makes the hallucination belong to the genre of the queer horror story practiced at the time (Stevens 2008). In the footsteps of Stevens, I suggest that if we reconsider the dream scene in the context of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of a similar hallucination in a late story, "The Beast in the Jungle," then the nightmare at the Louvre can be read not as the projection of artistic principles but a scenic representation of male homosexual panic.

Sedgwick's reading sums up James's short story "The Beast in the Jungle" from the perspective of nineteenth-century male homosexual panic. In the story Marcher, an American expatriate bachelor, upon a visit to his old country, finds his old lady friend May Bartram still waiting for him. They chat, socialize, and May confesses her love, but Marcher falters, remains uncertain, and does not take her as a wife. When May soon dies, at her grave, Marcher

reflects that his life had been empty and will now always be. Simultaneously, he is watching another male figure grieving at another new grave, and as he notices the other man's agitation, he hallucinates that a beast jumps on him, and in shock, he throws himself on the grave in escape. The open ended story is usually read as the story of the artist who has renounced heterosexual love, or human relationships in general, for the sake of his art.

Instead of the usual reading, Sedgwick analyses James's short story as part of a post-Romantic tradition of male homosexual panic. She starts out with the idea that in the nineteenth century especially, forms of male socializing required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, the homosexual ones. And because of this anxiety about the status of certain required male bonds, male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement. Sedgwick uses James short story to pinpoint the role of male homosexual panic in it. She explains that in the nineteenth century the odd character of the bachelor moves toward a recuperation, a domestication, it becomes partly feminized (Sedgwick 1990 and 1985, 92-4).

In "The Beast in the Jungle" Marcher is one such feminized bachelor character. He defies May's love not because of his secret artistic impulses but because of his secret homosexual affinities. Marcher lives as one in the closet, and his secret is that he imagines he has a homosexual secret. He needs May's company to look like the norm, to playact the heterosexual. The hallucination at the end of the story is related to this, Marcher's perception of another man reenacts the classic trajectory of male entitlement. It goes through the phases of mute assault, direct confrontation, passion shown, being aroused, and envy. Marcher identifies with the unknown man's loss, this is his only reaction to the female challenge. In the final hallucination of the beast he denies his identification with the unknown male figure. He acts out the nineteenth-century male homosexual panic while he in fact conceals, turns his back on, his homosexual possibilities.

Returning to the Louvre hallucination in *The Small Boy and Others*, I think the parallels between the two hallucinations are marked. First of all, the solitary male characters are similar. The absence of verbal communication is also common. There is a similar sequence of events, the trajectory of male entitlement following each other in set order: i. the unknown male figure stages a mute assault, ii. he directly confronts James, iii. he shows signs of passion, iv. James is aroused, v. James fights back and becomes similarly passionate, then vi. the ghost flees, vii. James wakes, open end. So the trajectory of male entitlement known from Sedgwick's analysis is repeated

here, again directed at another male. The scene is practically about James' perception of and identification with the numb man. All these parallels indicate that the hallucination scene in Louvre functions not so much as a preservation of artistic autonomy and solitude but rather as an acting out of homosexual panic.

Conclusion

The first volume of James's autobiography *A Small Boy and Others* is traditionally considered to represent the story of the young artist's development. I have retraced the theme of the 'scenic perspective' in the volume as the key element of this formal perspective. At the same time, I have shown that the scenic perspective is also used as a compositional method in the text. Moreover, as a complement Leon Edel's psychobiographical approach to Jamesian autobiographies, I found that the final hallucination scene of the volume in the Louvre functions as the scenic representation of sexual identification rather than the scenic representation of artistic identification.

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