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# Henry James's Experience of New York City in *The American Scene*

*Ágnes Zsófia Kovács*

Apart from his fictional production, Henry James published an array of nonfictional works beside his critical essays: travel writings, articles on current political issues, volumes of autobiography, and even a philosophical essay. Early on in his career, he wrote nonfiction sometimes to make ends meet and as part of an extended literary apprenticeship (Anesko vii), but beginning with the Prefaces, perhaps overburdened by the present and tempted to turn back to the past, his production was mainly constituted by these nonfiction efforts. The name of this phase, the "fourth phase," refers to William James's comment on Henry's *The Golden Bowl* in 1905. William disliked the style of *Bowl*, Henry's third manner and expressed a need for a fourth, possibly more straightforward style (Caramello 464). Henry's fourth manner, however, is wide off the mark William set: it can be seen as a modification of the third in two major respects: real material is handled and the genres relied on demand the use of the first person Henry had previously tried to avoid (464). Currently, Ross Posnock and Beverly Haviland called this part of James's work his second major phase (1907-14), one of autobiography, cultural criticism, and aesthetics (Posnock, "Breaking the Aura" 23-24, Haviland xv). The pieces that constitute the phase are first and foremost *The American Scene* about James's travels in the US, two and a half volumes of autobiography, articles and lectures, the Prefaces to The New York Edition, two novels, one of them unfinished, and further tales.

The critical reception of these works is a fascinating story as it represents trends in the James industry and critical fortunes simultaneously. James's contemporaries did not consider the writings of the phase to be pieces of cultural criticism at all. Critical orthodoxy in the 1930s, exemplified by Van Wyck Brooks, read them as degenerate productions of the expatriate (Brooks 19-26). Formally oriented criticism, heralded by F. O. Matthiessen, tended to read them as footnotes to a work already unified, focused on artistic qualities, and used them for background or biographical information. Avant-garde criticism stressed the freedom of signification and the ambiguity of the writing (Schloss 39-40, Caramello 465). The contemporary interest in multiculturalism and cultural studies, however, finds this phase of James doubly interesting: he is writing about culture and society explicitly and is also expressing his personal view of the problems encountered (Ickstadt 301). The interest in James and culture is epitomized by the volume *Henry James on Culture* edited by Pierre A. Walker, a selection of texts by James, and is theorized by John Carlos Rowe ("Critical Theory" 73-93). The race issue has been addressed by Kenneth Warren, Sara Blair, and the Fall 1995 issue of *The Henry James Review*. Diverse further aspects of the phase were studied by Ross Posnock (1991), Beverly Haviland (1997), and most recently, Richard Salm-

on (1997). As a secure mark of current interest, one can also see this stage focused on by fliers announcing conferences.

The works have achieved their "cultural" receptions individually as different genres used for the construction of James's personal narrative. Among them *The American Scene* is the most widely discussed text to date (Buelens, "Possessing" 166). In the articles written about his trips in the US, James encounters an America different from that of his memories and is first and foremost forced to consider the phenomena of race and racial vs. national identity: immigrants at Ellis Island, Jews in New York and anti-Semitism, African Americans in the North and in the South, the fate of the native natives: American Indians; the relativity of being native and alien. James's position to these issues is characteristically ambiguous and is subject to debate (Warren 141, Blair 158-210). Secondly, his approach to gender issues is another problem at hand: masculine and feminine roles and his rejection of the American ideal male position in them (Banta 30-33). Thirdly, he is preoccupied with the problem of the past: America as he remembers it and as it is. In the face of what he dislikes, he reconstructs his past in a nostalgic image of America (Rowe, *Henry Adams and Henry James* 134). Last but not least, the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the work are also explained: against Posnock's combative idea of the aesthetic ("Affirming the Alien" 226), Gert Buelens stresses the mediating value of the aesthetic in political action ("Possessing" 170), while David McWhirter explores the ethical stance behind the project ("Provision" 157).

In one of the justly famous scenes of James's *The American Scene*, James presents his report about a visit to the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York City. The place, writes James, constitutes a revelation about New York's loud life, and the so called amazing "hotel-world" of America. The hotel presents an expensive, glittering surface—but there is nothing for the inquisitive Jamesian eye to find beyond that surface, however hard he tries to read something into it. This specific scene at the Waldorf-Astoria has become a well known image of James's criticism of America in *The American Scene* (*TAS*) in general. Yet, of late, critical opinion seems to center on James's ambiguous relation to America rather than on his alleged dismissal of his American experience. James is clearly not attracted by what he sees during his journey but is at the same time arrested by his experience.

First I suggest that we look at James's ambiguous relation to what he represents in the context of James's own texts. I claim that James's descriptions in *TAS* rely on tropes that are familiar from his well known theory of fiction. In particular, I will be looking at two of his metaphors, namely "house" and "chamber." The use of the metaphors in *TAS* and in the con-texts indicates that James is relying on a specific model of experience during his travels. I also claim that this very model is being challenged by the New York scenes in *TAS*. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part the Waldorf-Astoria phenomenon is described. In the second part I proceed to point out a possible Jamesian context for his image of the Waldorf-Astoria, more specifically his notion of experience in his literary criticism. In the third stage, I refer back to the

Astoria scene and show how metaphors from James's literary criticism appear in it and explicate it. My aim is to show how, firstly, the Waldorf-Astoria scene challenges the basic Jamesian model of "experience" and secondly, indicates Jamesian reactions to the challenge.

## The Waldorf-Astoria Story

James describes, in The American Scene, the Waldorf-Astoria as a labyrinth that conveys to him the strongest impression, as he puts it: the essence, "of the loud New York story" (102). The hotel presents a contrast to the dire street, as one crosses its swing door, one plunges into the "revelation" which is the condensed characteristics of New York City. For James the hotel expresses a social ideal, a civilization, in other words a "capture of conceived manners themselves" (102). He states that the scenes at the Waldorf-Astoria represent that the contemporary American world is actually a "hotel-world." The contemporary "hotel-world" and its social ideals favor the public life versus the private life, which was the social ideal of a previous world. The contemporary "hotel-world" is open to anyone, once s/he can afford it and looks respectable enough. In this sense the new "hotel-world" breaks down old social canons.

We may wonder what James is actually after when he accentuates the importance of the "hotel-world" revelation at the Waldorf-Astoria. His statements are somewhat vague, but it is our task to explicate them further. He contends that the "hotel-world" may well be the "American spirit" finding itself. He witnesses "a society which had found there, in its prodigious public setting so exactly what it wanted. One was in presence, as never before, of a realized ideal and of that childlike rush of surrender to it and clutch at it which one was to recognize, in America, as the note of the supremely gregarious state" (104). The ideal state occurs because of the publicity of the setting, the lack of interior, which appears as the most important feature of the scene. The Waldorf-Astoria itself constitutes the image of the "hotel-world" in which there are no private, interior spaces.

The statements on omnipresent publicity in the "hotel-world" can be linked to James's ideas about a specifically American lack of interior. Not long before the Astoria scene James analyses a tendency to minimize the interior as the prevailing American conception of life. In particular, James complains about American houses without private spaces in them. He claims that there is a

> diffused vagueness of separating between apartments, between hall and room, between one room and another, between the room you are in and the one you are not in, between the place of passage and the place of privacy. [. . .] The effacement of the difference [between interior and exterior] has been [. . .] triumphantly brought about [. . .] Thus we have the law that every part of every house shall be [. . .] visible, visitable, penetrable, not only from every other part, but from as many parts of as many houses as possible [. . .]. Thus we see the systematized the indefinite extension of all spaces and the definite

merging of all functions. (166-67)

James goes on in a similar manner to claim that this arrangement, the lack of a well defined interior space, provides one with the opportunity of looking at the social tone that dictates it. By social tone James means the manners that accompany this spatial arrangement (166). James jumps to the conclusion that if the difference between the interior and the exterior is effaced, then there is no need for concentration, there is no space for a(n intimate) play of social relations as it can be practiced in the framework of a small room. Then there is space for the play of social relations only as it can be practiced in the framework of a huge hall.

James's reaction to the lack of interior is not so much dislike but surprise and a desire to understand. At the Waldorf-Astoria he envies the state of satisfaction he witnesses, and is at the same time amused by it. Also, he comments that "the reflective surfaces of the ironic, of the epic order, suspended in the New York atmosphere, have yet to show symptoms of shining out, and the monstrous phenomena themselves [. . .] got ahead of [. . .] any possibility of [. . .] dramatic capture. [. . .] [A] welter of objects and sounds in which relief, detachment, dignity, meaning perished utterly and lost all rights" (83). Similarly, at the instant when he accounts for the lack of interior in American houses, he again faces the need to think in a different way. He is "beguiled" and is also trying to find a limit amongst the showering impulses. Moreover, in the passages that close the New York chapters, he expresses that he is helpless with the fact he cannot possibly analyze the scenes any further. Yet, he is quite "agreeably baffled" (208). James is aware of the fact that what he sees has grown beyond his frame of reference but at the same time he is amused and wishes to find means to make sense of his experience.

My interest in these passages lies not in the sweeping generalizations about the "American spirit" or "American conception of life." Rather, for me, these passages illuminate how impressions are represented in *TAS*. Let me briefly refer to critical accounts of the way James the observer reacts to the fact that his system of intelligibility seems to break down during his trip. Buelens claims there is a deeply ambiguous relationship to America in James's text as James is both amused and horrified by realizing that his notions of personal understanding do not help him in analyzing events any more, in other words by realizing that his idea of the self does not seem to work. Buelens claims that "[t]he narrative voice of *TAS* seems to participate in the disruptive vision of the self even while critiquing it" ("James's Aliens" 353). Yet Buelens does not state exactly what notions of understanding are being challenged by the disruptive vision. Posnock's interpretation might help here, who argues that James's ambiguous relation to what he sees in *The American Scene* is connected to a pragmatic pluralism derived from Henry James's brother, William James's notion of experience. For William experience is a mosaic where pieces cling together by their edges, the pieces overlap and overflow in flux, and Henry would share this idea in *The American Scene*, too ("Affirming" 241).

If we consider a look at the problem of the absent interior in the context of James's literary and cultural criticism, we can link it to a specific Jamesian idea of experience and see Henry's relation to his American trip more complex than an acceptance of William's ideas. En plus, thereby we can also see more clearly what is at stake when James fails to comment in *The American Scene*.

## Jamesian Contexts: a Jamesian Model of Experience

The concerns one encounters in a close reading of the Waldorf-Astoria scene are familiar from James's well-known theory of fiction. The interior-exterior opposition, the focus on the visual, the search for revelations all constitute parts of his ideas on fiction that we know from his "The Art of Fiction" (1884) and other critical articles. For the sake of clarity (and brevity), I am going to focus on James's essays on Flaubert and "The Art of Fiction" itself to point out specific parallels.

Writing about Flaubert in the 1890s and 1902, James relies heavily on the interior-exterior opposition we have encountered in his description of the Waldorf-Astoria in *The American Scene*. Also, James's visual metaphors about Flaubert's lack of interest in character and focus on form both illustrate and elaborate the Jamesian standpoint on Flaubert in particular and on fiction in general. Besides, looking at two Jamesian metaphors on Flaubert provides us with a context to reconsider the problem of surfaces at the Waldorf-Astoria.

Starting with James's view of Flaubert that in turn will explain the spatial metaphors he uses to illustrate his points. For James, Flaubert is an interesting, ponderous failure ("La Tentation" 289) whose mistakes represent potential success ("Gustave Flaubert" 330). He is "formed intellectually of two quite distinct compartments: the sense of the real and the sense of the romantic" ("Gustave Flaubert" 321). James describes his sense of the real as the basis of his strange talent, "his peculiar talent [...] in the description [...] of material objects, and it must be admitted that he carried it very far" ("La Tentation" 290), and his masterpiece, Madame Bovary, as not his most imaginative work. So there is criticism implied in James's account because Flaubert nearly excludes the free play of the imagination in his best writing ("Gustave Flaubert" 322) and because it is limited to deplorable subjects ("Gustave Flaubert" 326). At the same time, his imagination is also portrayed as great and splendid, but is not favored by James.

In this context, James's reading of Flaubert's mistakes deserves particular attention as it highlights the potential James saw in Flaubert. Writing about L'Éducation sentimentale, James discovers the indicative mistake in the figure of Mme. Arnoux, saying that the character is Flaubert's least superficial one, it is somehow moral. The figure is an error inasmuch as it does not fit in the company of Flaubert's superficial characters. It is also an unconscious error, as the author had not suspected it was an opportunity that would have counted as his finest ("Gustave Flaubert" 330)—from James's perspective, of course. It seems that for James a moral character can be opposed to one that is portrayed through the description of things and he misses the

depiction of a moral character in Flaubert and would value the appearance of one (Kovács, "A képzelőerő szerepe" 232).

From a Jamesian point of view Flaubert's case, his conviction that the beauty of art is dependent on form is greatly discredited because James deems the Flaubertian conviction shallow.

> He regarded the work of art as existing but by its expression, and defied us to name any other measure of its life that is not a stultification. He held style accordingly an indefeasible part of it and found beauty, interest and distinction as dependent on it for emergence as a letter committed to the post-office is dependent on an addressed envelope. Strange enough, it may well appear to us to have to apologise for such notions as eccentric. There are persons who consider that style comes of itself—we see and hear at present, I think, enough of them; and to whom he would doubtless have remarked that it goes, of itself, still faster. The thing naturally differs in fact with the nature of the imagination: the question is that of proprieties and affinities, sympathy and proportion. ("Gustave Flaubert" 338)

The basis of James's critique is directed at Flaubert's insistence on the formal aspect of the novelist's art: the sole concern with style. Expression, for James, is not the only measure of the life of a work of art; it is as eccentric to say only form matters as it would be to say that only the subject matter does. I think here James misses that part of his own model where the perceiver's senses and the mind cooperate to construct an illusion ("Guy de Maupassant" 523), and he is astounded by the eccentric and limiting focus on the stage of execution only (Kovács, *Function of the Imagination* 29). To say that such a preference for execution on Flaubert's part differs from the nature of the imagination Flaubert applies is to connect Flaubert's two sides, the romantic one (Salammbô, Saint-Antoine) and his realist one (Madame Bovary) with the question of execution ("Gustave Flaubert" 335). The Realist project, however, is concerned with execution only, while the Romantic one is aware of the importance of a construction of an illusion to be executed.

The Jamesian position on Flaubert can be explicated through his metaphors on the French author. The first metaphor James uses is that of the crystal box. For James, a writer of the first order writes in the style of a "crystal box" ("Gustave Flaubert" 335). It resembles "when in the hand and however closely viewed a shapely crystal box, and yet to be seen when placed on the table and opened to contain innumerable compartments, springs and tricks. One is ornamental either way, but one is in the second way precious, too" ("Gustave Flaubert" 335). In this metaphor one's way of looking at the box stands for one's writing style. More specifically, Flaubert's two coexisting styles, the romantic and the realist, are identified with ways of looking at the crystal box. The box can be studied both from the inside and from the outside, or only from the outside, respectively. The concentration on form, then, the realist project, is ornamental but

not precious, and is the result of too close an observation "in the hand." As opposed to this, the romantic project is both ornamental and precious, in placing the object of study far enough ("on the table") for the perceiver to notice that it can be opened and that innumerable compartments and particles can be found in it.

The opposition of observing the crystal box from the outside only or both from inside and outside is related to that of observing things or thoughts. (To refer to specifically Jamesian terminology, it is related to observing superficial character or moral character.) This relation is to be shown through another spatial metaphor, the chamber of the soul, where James contends that Flaubert "stopped too short [. . .]. He hovered forever at the public door, in the outer court, the splendor of which very properly beguiled him [. . .] was meant to carry further, the other doors were meant to open. He should at least have listened at the chamber of the soul" ("Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert" 313-14). In this metaphor the inside-outside opposition surfaces in the image of the house of fiction which could not be accessed by Flaubert. He was paralyzed by the splendor of the court, as if by the ornaments of the crystal, and this prevented him from observing the innermost parts of the house. He could not open the doors, as he also had problems with opening the crystal box. He was too close to the public door and enthralled by the beauty of the outer form to notice the spaces to be opened beyond that. Doubtless this is the reason why James calls Flaubert "one of the most conspicuous of the faithless" ("Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert" 313), and considers him an interesting failure.

James's notion "the chamber of the soul" is a trope from his "Art of Fiction" from 1884, in which he gives an account of the desirable process of artistic experience. The Jamesian notion of experience explains the reasons why James considers Flaubert's work a failure. In "The Art of Fiction" James explains the myriad forms of personal senses of reality by the nature of experience. For James, reality comes into being through personal experience. Although James starts out by criticizing Walter Besant's claim that one should write from experience as inconclusive, he basically accepts the very same idea. One should write from experience but this is not a prerequisite by which to evaluate authors, for experience is a process and one cannot evaluate such an idiosyncratic phenomenon. James uses a spectacular spatial metaphor to illuminate the process:

> Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken-threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind, and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. ("Art of Fiction" 52)

Experience, then, is a sensibility that collects impulses. Experience happens in one's

consciousness and constitutes the processes going on in the mind. When experience is fine, in other words when the web in one's consciousness is sensitive, the web of experience can sense even the tiniest impulses and attribute meaning to them. Imagination is the quality of the mind which makes the process of experience fine, sensitive, which motors the unlimited, incomplete process called experience. James adds that an author can represent only this kind of personal experience when he writes.

James's criticism of Flaubert relies on this model of experience. James's criticism of Flaubert refers to a specific lack of Flaubert's experience, namely that Flaubert was never able to enter the chamber of the "soul" and give an account of the process of experience. Instead, he only writes about the work of the senses. As far as James is concerned, the work of the senses needs to be represented, but this only constitutes a beginning for the work of experience. For James the most important aspect of experience, the attribution of meaning, goes on in the mind (or soul) in the form of a process. Therefore it is only natural that James points out the need for the representation of the mind (or soul) in Flaubert. Basically, James misses Flaubert's representation of the interior space where experience is processed.

## James's Experience of New York City in *The American Scene*

Let us return to James's criticism of the lack of interior at the Waldorf-Astoria can be reconsidered from the perspective of James's model of experience in his literary criticism. The terms James used in the description of the Waldorf-Astoria scene appear similar to his general account of experience in "The Art of Fiction" and resemble the structure of his spatial metaphors on Flaubert. Specific features of the Astoria scene which appear in James's model of experience indicate that the scene is exemplary not only of the American scene but of the fate of the creative writer in a new context as well.

Firstly, the Astoria scene constitutes a process of experience according to the Jamesian concept of experience. It is a "revelation" for the observing James about the American "hotel world" in particular and the American spirit in general. Similarly, in "The Art of Fiction" James describes the process of experience as an instance of revelation. On the basis of some sensory impulse, the perceiving mind is able to process an impression into specialized symbolic constructs that go on changing with the movements of the perceiving mind. James's account of the scene at the Astoria represents a fine example of how a sensory impulse grows into "revelation," i.e. in this case a treatise upon American ways of behavior.

Secondly, one can also find a similarity in the way James depicts experience in "The Art of Fiction" and in the Astoria scene. In *The American Scene* the space of the Astoria is described in terms of chambers, as a space constituted of interlinked chambers. We can recall that James's account of the process of experience in "The Art of Fiction" relies on the image of the "chamber of the soul" in which experience takes place. However, there is slight modification of the image in the case of the scene at the Astoria: it is a labyrinth of chambers instead of chambers with well-defined functions.

In other words, in the American setting it is difficult to distinguish the chamber of the soul from other chambers of the house it belongs to.

Is this difference of any significance for us thinking about the relevance of the Jamesian model of experience from his mid-career to his account from his late phase? By all means, because it is through this difference that the interior-exterior opposition in the 'house' metaphor of the Flaubert articles between a sense-oriented and a thought-oriented way of writing can be related to the Astoria scene, a third similarity to take account of. The Waldorf-Astoria as a building is like the house that is to be penetrated by the writers's eye in the Flaubert essays. Writing about Flaubert, James expressed his opinion that Flaubert never once got into the house of fiction and was able to open the door to the chamber of the soul. He remained outside, in other words cared for matters of literary execution and not for the process of understanding in the mind. If the Waldorf-Astoria is like a house of fiction to be entered the writer or perceiving mind is supposed to enter the chamber of the soul in it to be able to render the process of experience. So from the perspective of James's literary criticism, the Waldorf-Astoria can be conceived of as the house of fiction James the writer is to enter in order to open the door of the chamber of the American soul there.

However, from James's account it is apparent that the innermost chamber, the chamber of the mind the writer is after is simply absent from the Waldorf-Astoria. Although James as the perceiver attempts to perform an act of understanding there and even relies on all the basic concepts of his model of experience while he is doing so, the act itself remains ambiguously devoid of understanding an "essence of the scene." James states there is a revelation of understanding going on, the chambers are being discussed and analyzed, still, the outcome is far off the expected understanding of the scene. All that comes to the fore is the superficiality of the scene, the lack of social interplay and motivation. In other words, there is a lack of experience to be represented for the writer's eye in this setting.

This lack of interior as the "lack of experience to be represented" constitutes the very problem James has with the American "hotel-world" in the Astoria scene. If there is no interior space of experience and social play within the house of fiction, then what should a writer specialized in representing the process of experience write about? The problem is not with the perceiving mind but with the "subject" in the sense that the impulses are only able to generate an impression of emptiness in the perceiving mind.

To make matters worse, at the Astoria James faces the fact that his whole conception about writing is being challenged. James the observer approaches the scene with all his perceiving might but realizes that the process of experience stops short of the chaotic abundance of impulses and impenetrable glittering surfaces in New York City (Kaplan 10). The "subject," seemingly devoid of the process of experience to be represented, actually defies the observer's attempt to create an experience on the basis of it. James's bafflement and lack of commentary are the results of this understanding on his part. In this sense, James's understanding is different from his early idea of

America in Hawthorne where he condemned the American social scene to be unworthy of representation and he himself moved to Europe in search of more specialized contexts to write about. In contrast, at this instance at the Astoria James glimpses the social scene of a new era he needs to face.

Yet, there is another contradiction involved in the Astoria scene. I am thinking of James's reaction to his understanding that the New York City atmosphere suspends the process of experience in his old sense of the term. James, as mentioned above, is baffled by New York City but at the same time he is also amused and beguiled by it and is admiring it. He is not at all bitter or sour to see that his frame of reference is crumbling, that in New York there is no interior or depth to understand through the process of experience. Although he is aware that his most important objective with his trip cannot be realized, he goes on with his description of surfaces that for him are signifiers of absence only.

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