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ULTÚRÁN INNEN ÉS TÚL –

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ROZSNYAI BÁLINT TISZTELETÉRE

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ITHIN AND WITHOUT CULTURE:

ESSAYS IN

HONOR OF BÁLINT ROZSNYAI

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Egyetemi Könyvtár  
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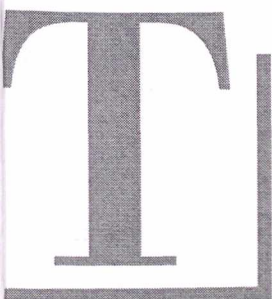
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ÁGNES ZSÓFIA KOVÁCS

University of Szeged,  
Department of American Studies

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## HE BEWILDERMENT OF CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN JAMES'S *THE AMBASSADORS* AND *THE AMERICAN SCENE*

### INTRODUCTION

Bewilderment is a central concept in Henry James's model of understanding. For readers of James bewilderment is a well-known emotion that accompanies the understanding of unexpected phenomena in the novels. In this paper I wish to explore the concept of bewilderment through the notion of cultural hybridity as it is used by Homi Bhabha. The reason for this attempt is that the two concepts seem to have a lot in common. On the one hand, bewilderment emerges when a projected understanding is baffled by new experience in scenarios where two cultures meet. On the other hand, cultural hybridity, by definition, is a state that results from the interactions of cultures. Therefore my question is not "Is hybridity present in *The Ambassadors* and *The American Scene*" but rather and more specifically, "Can the structure and the cultural aspect of Jamesian bewilderment be transcribed in terms of cultural hybridity?". My approach is practical: I am looking at *The Ambassadors* and *The American Scene* as sites of cultural interaction from the perspective of James studies – rather than from that of postcolonial theory. However, this practical approach entails an attempt to find an intersection of the two notions, of bewilderment and hybridity – of practice and theory, if you like.

I am going to examine the relation of bewilderment and hybridity in three stages. The first stage addresses the relation between hybridity and bewilderment in general to explicate their similarity. The second section is concerned with specific scenes of bewilderment in *The Ambassadors* and *The American Scene* and focuses on the implied hybridity of these scenes. The third stage formulates a redefinition of Jamesian bewilderment drawing on postcolonial terminology.



## I. THE PROBLEM THROUGH DEFINITIONS

Let us have a closer look at the two concepts, cultural hybridity and bewilderment in order to be able to compare their structures before actually analyzing our texts. First I am considering cultural hybridity in general and according to Bhabha in particular, just to make the beginning clear. Then, I am focusing on Jamesian bewilderment specifically to show its structure, which, I think, is similar to that of hybridity.

In academic cultural studies hybridity is used as a counter-concept to dissolve essentializations of ethnicity. As Alberto Moreiras has pointed out, the term opens up a space hitherto closed for traditional approaches to ethnicity. Instead of an essentializing agenda, hybridity is used to ground a fluid politics of identity, to critique static notions of ethnicity and culture (Moreiras 1999, 375). In other words, the term marks the emergence of a new set of presuppositions about identity (Hall 1996, 6) and ethnicity. However, there has been a growing literature critiquing the notion of hybridity. One key criticism often levelled against the notion of cultural hybridity is that it assumes the prior existence of whole cultures, the notion of culture as content or product (Young 1995, 165 and Ashcroft 1989, 41–2). Another criticism of cultural hybridity, from the perspective of ethnography and sociology, is that in actual scenarios it proves less prevalent and positive than theorists argue, since processes of fragmentation and ghettoisation signal the global trend toward ethnicisation instead of hybridization (Werbner 1997, 12).

A standard definition of hybridity is Homi Bhabha's which has gained widespread use in literary and cultural studies. From Bhabha's perspective, hybridity frames a third space in which the ambivalences of the cultural encounter are enacted (Bhabha 1996, 58). Bhabha sees the transgression of national or ethnic borders as the key to the condition of hybridity: a double perspective becomes possible and signals the migrant as the double voice that speaks from two places at once, and inhabits neither (Bhabha 1994, 36). This is the space of liminality, of no space: the space of inter is the *in between* space (Bhabha 1996, 54). Bhabha uses the term 'liminality', like hybridity, to refer to the moment or place of untranslatability, the limit where a thing becomes its alterity.

As Pnina Werbner explains, Bhabha draws on Walter Benjamin's argument that accurate translation is impossible. Since the intentionality of words is lost in translation, no translation can exhaust the meanings of the original, especially because meanings themselves are subject to future historical revision (Werbner 2001, 136). Yet translation can create new meanings in the translating language. In the colonial encounter, then, it is not just the colonized who are subjected; the colonizers, too, are transformed, while the colonized deploy borrowed forms to tell their own narratives that subvert the cultural authority of the colonizers. This is the counter narrative or the in-between third space that eludes polarity (Bhabha 1994, 102–22). The liminal

space is a permanent performative transgression of national grand narratives by the patches of many national voices from the margins. Of course, the counter narrative is never complete, it is full of discontinuities and ruptures (Walder 1998, 111). As Gilroy also argues, this creates a double consciousness, a split subject, a fractured reality frame (Gilroy 1993, 127).

The state of bewilderment in James has a hermeneutical structure similar to that of cultural hybridity described by Bhabha. In the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* James places bewilderment into the centre of an artist's story about the human scene. A novelist should write about the character's reflections of life. Doing this, the novelist is supposed to reproduce the right mixture of intelligence, experience, and bewilderment. However, he is to keep down the terms through which bewilderment is reproduced because the reader understands the simplest terms only. From the perspective of the novelist, bewilderment is suspense, prime implication in any story (James 1934, 64–5). Thus for James as a novelist bewilderment is suspended judgment before mysteries incomprehensible for us, not simply the act of getting rid of the well-known, old habit.

The two most powerful critical accounts of Jamesian bewilderment are those of Paul B. Armstrong and Ross Posnock who read the phenomenon of Jamesian bewilderment in basically different ways. For Armstrong, Jamesian bewilderment is that emotional state when the character is unable to use his horizon of expectations to interpret a situation. The character needs to reconsider his presuppositions in order to be able to conceive of a new social scenario, a new set of relations among people (Armstrong 1987, 68–9). Armstrong explains bewilderment as the key element of a characters' process of interpretation, when presuppositions are defied and a new understanding emerges (75–7). For Ross Posnock, the state of bewilderment is of wider significance. For him bewilderment in James is a collision with the unknown, a willingness to lose one's physical and mental bearings. This is a venturing out of one's shell already in *The Ambassadors* (Posnock 1991, 238). Moreover, this view amounts to the experience of the fluidity of the self in *The American Scene*, Posnock argues (Posnock 1998, 230–1). So while for Armstrong bewilderment signals the modifications of the horizon of expectations in a hermeneutic circle of understanding, for Posnock it signals the emergence of a permeable subject, an erased tension between the self and the world.

Conflicting interpretations of Jamesian bewilderment are relevant for our reconsideration of the term from the perspective of cultural hybridity: it would seem that the antiessentialist project implied by the term hybridity is only commensurable with Ross Posnock's account of the state of bewilderment. However, the structure of the state of bewilderment as willingness to openness and for changing one's habits is the same as it is in hybridity. Let us see how bewilderment actually happens in *The Ambassadors* and in *The American Scene* and if it is compatible with the notion of hybridity.



## II. BEWILDERMENT IN JAMES

### I. THE AMBASSADORS: AMERICANS IN PARIS

*The Ambassadors* is a story not only of Lambert Strether's adventure in Paris but of several Americans: it is a novel about cultural interaction. However, not all the characters can be thought of in terms of a liminal position between two cultures. Chad Newsome, the gallant American son has lived in Paris for five years and interiorized Parisian cultured, leisurely ways of behavior. He learns his lesson best through Mme Vionnet, his illicit lover. Yet, when their affair is revealed, he instantly reverts back to his old American motivations and becomes willing to join the company at home. Another expat American, Maria Gostrey is a spinster who has been acting as a guide for Americans in Europe ever since she settled here as a young woman. She would happily get married to Strether if he wanted to live the life of expat Americans in Paris: a possible new beginning for him. But Strether declines the implicit offer and returns to America where after his activity in Paris he has no future any more.

I argue that among all the Americans in Paris the novel represents, it is only Lambert Strether whose behavior can be assessed in terms of cultural hybridity because of the in-between position he finds himself in the end. Lambert Strether's famous adventure in *The Ambassadors* is practically the transformation of his notions of decency and propriety, morals and manners. As the story goes, Strether changes from being an advocate of American standards of decency into an advocate of charming Parisian manners and of cultural pleasures. Or to put it bluntly, the innocent American is initiated into European experience. As opposed to this, I think his experience is not simply that of being initiated into a new set of standards. The emotion of bewilderment makes him reconsider his former values and reflect on his own incomprehension in a way that makes him reflect on any possible alternative set of values also.

In the first paragraph of the novel we are already shown that Strether possesses a double consciousness. On the one hand, he is tied by this filiation – American standards and expectations of behavior represented by Woollett and Mrs Newsome. On the other hand, he is instinctively drawn to Europe and its experience. Strether is happy he misses his meeting with this compatriot, Waymarsh, to be able to enjoy the impressions of Europe, this time still Britain, longer. Does this Jamesian double consciousness have anything to do with Bhabha's sense of the term?

Strether's condition of double consciousness is played out in several scenes of bewilderment. There are two specific scenes where the emotion of bewilderment figures centrally in *The Ambassadors*: one, Strether in the box with Chad in the Opera and two, his vision of Mme Vionnet. Practically, his understanding of the two key characters of his drama, Chad and Vionnet, are determined by the emotion of be-

wilderment in these scenes. The contrast of his expectations and actual experience stares him in the face and his subsequent behavior is determined by his modified apprehensions. Let us retrace these two scenes in detail and then link them to the concept of hybridity.

In the scene of Chad in the theater box one can find sensual, emotional, and imaginative aspects of Strether's experience of Chad's new identity. Strether strongly desires to see Chad who appears and is not Chad as he remembers him. On the basis of the discovery Strether is finally bewildered and his imagination begins to roam. The sensual impression Strether has is mighty little: Chad introduces himself and there is silence because the act is going on. Strether can only see Chad changed: not so much the grey streaks in his hair but the friendly and confident smile, the refinement that had done over his features. During the silence Strether's imagination has a chance to react to his vision of the new Chad. His perception of the change in Chad's identity is a sensation that would count in life. This sensation acts forcibly, and Strether seems to feel a life of high pressure in consequence of the half hour the act lasts for some days while the sensation is with him. He associates this feeling of high pressure with accidents of high civilization, an exposure to conditions without relief at hand. His imagination is trying to work the change up through the pressure.

In the face of the complete change there is only the emotion of bewilderment that remains because there is no way imaginable that could explain the phenomenon of so complete a change. The emotion of bewilderment is to make him reconsider his previous ideas of Chad; at the same time Strether keeps his bafflement to himself: he reflects that his bewilderment concerning Chad should not be seen by an outside observer. Strether's perceptions are painfully conscious of everything around him but he has no idea of how to behave in the situation except to remain silent.

There is also a social side to the activity of Strether's imaginative rush and emotion of bewilderment in the presence of Chad's transformation. As opposed to his own reaction, Strether is appalled to mark the social sightlessness in Waymarsh, who cannot even help with sensing, not to mention with explaining, the change. This indicates that the ability to react to the change is based on a primarily *social* sight. Also, later on during the night, Strether reflects that Chad was patient in waiting for Strether to watch the show: he was in fact benevolent and had a wonderful way about Strether's not knowing how to behave. Strether is now taught that in even so small a thing as coming into a theater box there are different ways. So Strether is taught the wonderful ability to have different ways in little things: a lesson in Parisian manners.

The second scene where bewilderment figures is the one involving Strether with Chad's suspected lover, Mme Vionnet in the Notre-Dame. Strether would like to get rid of the burden of his impressions of Chad and "let things be," so he seeks temporary refuge in the Notre-Dame, where, paradoxically, he experiences another be-



wildering perception of (non)identity that stirs his imagination. He pauses to watch one of the visitors, a lady in one of the side chapels. She is strangely fixed and immobile, as if she had lost herself within the focus of the shrine. She must have had a serious case to think about that has brought her to this spot familiar to her. The Lady's envied immobility and preoccupation makes Strether associate other memories to her: "since it was the way of nine tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined" (James 1994, 174). She is like the heroine of an old story or drama, young, interesting, with dignity. The question is what serious cause could possibly have brought her to the spot, into immobile need. Strether sees her image as that of a damsel in distress who needs a knight to save her: a melodramatic association of his imagination indeed (Griffin 1991, 50-1, Brooks 1976, 197).

The fact that the lady turns out to be Mme Vionnet makes Strether confused. He has created a mental impression of the lady by imagining her into a melodramatic story as sensual impressions were quickly altered and boosted by his impressions of imagined things. The special interest he took in the Lady and the story into which he had placed her would have been intimidating, had Mme Vionnett known about it – but Strether remains silent and the lurking image of the lady exists in his imagination only. His confusion is akin to bewilderment: how to reconcile the imagined image of the lady with that of Vionnet, as the identity of the lady in distress is new for him and difficult to match with his previous impressions. However, the two will coexist and his behavior toward Vionnett will be directed toward the lady in distress.

Bewilderment in both scenes constructs the necessity of reinterpretation in Strether's mind. He needs to understand both Chad and Mme Vionnet from a new perspective that displaces him the same way as it displaces the others' image in him. Strether imagines new roles for himself to the others whereby their relations and significance for Strether change.

## II. AN EX-PAT IN AMERICA: *THE AMERICAN SCENE* AND *THE WALDORF-ASTORIA*

James describes 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." (James 1968, 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 (ibid.), a civilization, in other words a "capture of conceived manners themselves" (ibid.). 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" most 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 child-like 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 does James analyse 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. (166)

[...] 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 (167).

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 re-



flective 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 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.

I find deeply ambiguous James's reaction to his understanding that the New York City atmosphere suspends the process of experience as he has seen it so far. 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 an absence only.

My interest in these passages lies not in the sweeping generalizations about the "American spirit" or an "American conception of life." Rather, for me, these passages illuminate how impressions are represented and how the experience of bewilderment is constructed in *The American Scene*. Let me briefly refer to two critical accounts of the way James the observer reacts to the fact that his system of intelligibility seems to break down during his trip and indicate the similarity of these accounts to the concept of Jamesian bewilderment. First, Gert 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 realizing his "idea of the self" does not seem to work. Buelens claims that "[t]he narrative voice of *The American Scene* seems to participate in the disruptive vision of the self even while critiquing it" (Buelens 1999, 353). Yet Buelens does not state exactly what notions of understanding are being challenged by the disruptive vision, as he focuses on what happens to the idea of the self instead. From the perspective of a Jamesian model of experience, this participation in the disruptive vision of the self equals the state of bewilderment. The reason for this lies in that the process of experience needs to be suspended, and the narrator's previous knowledge of the situation reconsidered in a profoundly different way.

Second, Ross Posnock 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 James would share this idea in *The American Scene*, too (Posnock 1998, 241). Let us recall Posnock's account of Jamesian bewilderment that sounds strikingly similar to his definition of experience *à la* William James. Posnock claimed that when bewildered, the Jamesian character ventures out of his shell, lets loose its bearings, experiences its own fluidity: the tension between the self and the world is erased. So Posnock's reading finds a William Jamesian fluid sense of experience in *The American Scene* epitomized within scenes of bewilderment.

### III. CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN JAMES

How can these instances be translated into the performance of cultural hybridity in the two texts? In both cases we have witnessed profound reassessments of models of understanding – yet to what extent are these reassessments facilitated culturally, and can we take them as part of an antiessentialist agenda to be able to say they are actually instances of cultural hybridity?

As for *The Ambassadors*, Strether at the outset is reported to possess a double consciousness: this is the very state of hybridity. Or is this a coincidence of terms only? One can perceive the story as one of Strether the migrant colonizer who tries to enforce his own cultural norms on Mme Vionnet, the colonized. Vionnet in turn uses Strether's language to formulate her narrative and subvert Strether's initial position. Paris is the liminal space of the interaction. The narrative that emerges in Strether's mind is made up of the patches of the two national narratives and subverts his notions about work, duty, and gender roles to be performed.

Strether's norms at the outset are traditional New England values like work, morality and specified gender roles. He is to make Chad get back to a life of work instead of aimless lingering and amorous adventure. It is his duty to bring the young man back to his mother and the family business. Last but not least, he is to perform his masculinity through this, the reward of which would be his marriage to the wealthy Mrs Newsome. Yet, when he would project his values to Chad and Vionnet, he realizes that the aims do not tie in with the actual case: the son is not the vulgar lover and the woman is not a harlot from the streets at all, either. The baffling instances of bewilderment seen above make Strether reflect on his own norms and realize that he prefers to change them. Mme Vionnet appropriates American standards perfectly but lives out her own motivations through them. She learns the language, she has a charming American idiom she mixes with French. Her effect on Strether is revolting: Strether has to see that instead of the immoral wench he is fac-



ing a damsel in distress whom he should help. Strether forgives the couple their lie because of his image of Vionnet in distress he received in the Notre-Dame. Chad is not taken that far by Vionnett: he decides to return to business despite Strether's plea for the contrary.

By the end of the story Strether's double condition has evolved into an in-between position. He has a vision of the appearances and lies involved in a Parisian life of charm, culture, and pleasure he rejects. At the same time, he is not drawn to his old American values of work, duty, masculine assertiveness, either. As for work, he returns to Woollett not knowing what he will live on, if he can pursue his effeminate editorial work. As for duty, his new personal duty is to pursue reflective understanding that allows for instances of bewilderment. As for his masculinity, he declines an offer of marriage. His narrative about his own position in the events remains ambiguous both for Americans and for Parisians. He is an outsider speaking from a liminal space where he does not belong to the world of either Woollett or Paris, where his class and gender positions get questioned.

As for *The American Scene*, James the narrator returns to New York City, the place he remembers from his childhood and youth, after an absence of decades. The actual New York City proves strikingly and vulgarly different from the mental image. Thus James's New York City becomes a site in between memories and experience, an elusive liminal space, a third place. Also, one could recapitulate the plot of the volume by saying that James the conservative colonizer arrives to find he has to criticize the present way of life as it clashes with his idea about civilized life so much. Meanwhile, he is producing narratives about his experience in the liminal space to describe and interpret the clashes between memory and experience, expectation and impression. These narratives make him analyze the double situations and realize that his model of understanding breaks down in the face of the new kind of experience. Yet, he does not react as if terrified by this: he is beguiled, agreeably baffled, in other words, inspired to make sense of not being able to make sense. He sees he needs to suspend his idea about the precious interiority and continuity of the workings of the mind, the social quality of interpersonal relations and understanding, the priority of reflection over action. Yet he does not rejoin his old view nor does he acquire the new model. Instead, he lingers as the outsider observer of actions and sites, writing his own novel and diary at the same time in the form of a liminal narrative, the travel account.

## CONCLUSION

Lambert Strether from *The Ambassadors* and the narrator of *The American Scene* are pushed into in-between cultural positions in which they perform neither their old nor their newly learnt ways of behaviour. These emotional states are akin to the

state of cultural hybridity because of the cultural openness they result in. Granting this similarity, the notion of bewilderment needs to be modified in turn. In both texts, Jamesian bewilderment is a questioning of not any but primarily of cultural presuppositions. So the cultural aspect is a basic constitutive feature of Jamesian bewilderment.

However, one can also see a point of difference if one compares Strether's and the narrator's respective positions at the ends of the respective plots. Strether has decided to adopt a new set of manners to live by: these do not conform to either American or Parisian social expectations, yet they form a coherent new attitude to the world he can live by from then on. In contrast, the narrator's shock of incomprehension at the Astoria is followed by a more general uncertainty about the workings of the mind, the use of attitudes and models if they break down in the face of phenomena they cannot process. To my mind, in *The Ambassadors* hybridity happens within the framework of the essentialist project of a hermeneutical process of understanding – as Armstrong argues. In *The American Scene*, the very questioning of the hermeneutical process initiates the emergence of a permeable concept of the self – as Posnock claims. So I think the two texts represent the use of two different kinds of bewilderment and hybridity in James. It would be another task to investigate these diverse concepts of bewilderment to their full theoretical implications within James's work.

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