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8.

Henry James, vulgarity and transatlantic moderation

Andrew Taylor

I

In the May 1890 edition the New York periodical the *North American Review* a pair of articles appeared under the rubric ‘The Typical American’, one written by the Scottish poet, novelist and literary critic Andrew Lang and the other by Max O’Rell (the penname of the French author and journalist Leon Blouet). Both writers demurred from the task at hand, sceptical of the usefulness of the national type as a principle of representation. For Lang, being asked to ‘define the typical American’ was ‘like one of those difficult drawing-room games which are played with pencil and scissors’, a ‘sport or pastime’ that inevitably results in a flattening distortion. ‘We know what the French think our type is’, he writes, ‘ – not John Bull at all, but a long thin man in tweeds, with long pendent whiskers, and an air of respectable dilapidation. That is not quite accurate.’ Nor it seems is the conventional American, ‘our traditional Jonathan’, who invariably appears ‘with a huge straw hat, with his chair tilted back, with the big knife that restlessly whittles, and the plug of tobacco which is incessantly chewed’.¹ While Lang gestures at some qualities which might seem to approach American typicality – interest in cookery, the ability to explain baseball, fondness for the Irish – it is clear that he regards the sheer diversity of the United States, and of its textual depictions, as evidence of the inevitable failure of these characterisations.

Max O’Rell’s resistance to the idea of the national character sketch is differently inflected. He had already published a successful account of an outsider’s view of the United States the previous year (1889) with *Jonathan and His Continent: Rambles Through*

American Society, which appeared first in Paris and was then swiftly translated into English (by his wife) and became a best-seller in Britain and the United States. In that book O'Rell affects a stance of amazement, bordering on inarticulacy, at the magical wonders of the New World:

I have been through part of the country, and I cannot get over it... I am out of breath, turned topsy-turvy. It is pure conjuring; it is Robert Houdin [the French magician John Eugène Robert-Houdin] over again – occasionally perhaps Robert Macaire [a fictional French criminal] too, but let us not anticipate. Give me time to recover my breath and set my ideas in order. Those Americans are reeking with *unheard-of-ness*, I can tell you that to begin with. My ideas are all jostling in my poor old European brain. There is no longer anything impossible, and the fairy tales are child's play compared to what we may see every day. Everything is prodigious, done by steam, by electricity; it is dazzling, and I no longer wonder that Americans only use their adjectives in the superlative.²

Language here seems to be both inadequate and to overrun itself (perhaps another form of inadequacy). The United States overwhelms with its novelty – those aspects that are unheard of and still to be written by an 'old European brain' – at the same time as O'Rell acknowledges that the only vocabulary that approaches American reality is the prodigal excess of superlatives. In his *North American Review* piece, the following year, this sense of how difficult it might be to represent national difference is tempered by the assertion of a transnational class alliance, in which the excesses of modernity, with its occult energies, belong to an unreadable America that O'Rell chooses to transcend. He writes: 'In feeling, in behavior, in culture, and in refinement of manners, there is no difference – none whatever –

between an American gentleman and a gentleman from France, England, or any European country, including Germany... The aristocracy of nature is universal.’³ If the national character sketch is an unrealisable undertaking, comfort can nevertheless be found in a cosmopolitan elite for whom nationality becomes an irrelevance.

During this period the *North American Review* was greatly preoccupied with the trying to characterise the contours of the Anglo-American relationship. Twenty-five years after the end of the American Civil War, and the tensions generated in the North by Britain’s perceived support of the Confederacy, the *Review* offered a collection of sketches and reflections on the idea of national character under the provocative title ‘Do Americans Hate England?’ The cumulative effect of these pieces was to collapse the contours of national singularity into something resembling a transatlantic, transnational Anglo-Saxonism. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, for one, asserted that ‘a common motherhood is a strong tie’ so that

It may be true, at any rate, that the more English the Englishman, and the more American the American, the better they will really esteem each other; and that their visible jealousies are only such as are often noticed in cousinly circles, where the essential kinship makes the trivial variations more exasperating.⁴

Andrew Carnegie echoed the mood of familial rapprochement, assuring his readers that ‘The educated American grows in liking for England more and more. The educated Englishman considers the republic more and more an important factor in the world, and is more and more proud of the fact that it is English.’ ‘We shall have our family jars’, notes Carnegie, ‘but in any serious emergency, woe betide the race that attempts to go too far against one branch of the English race or another!’⁵

Harper's New Monthly Magazine, another American periodical much preoccupied with the status of the Anglo-American relationship in the years after the Civil War, published a lengthy piece in 1885 by John Fiske, a celebrated professor of history at Washington University, St. Louis, on the subject of 'Manifest Destiny'. Fiske was an early American populariser of Charles Darwin, whose theories of evolution he was keen to reconcile with Christian doctrine.⁶ As his *Harper's* essay made clear, the notion of 'manifest destiny' had now expanded from one that defined the shape of American difference to a vision of transatlantic superiority informed by Darwinian natural selection. Fiske's 'general conclusion' is that "the work which the English race began when it colonized North America is destined to go on until every land on the earth's surface that is not already the seat of an old civilization shall become English in its language, in its religion, and to a predominant extent in the blood of its people".⁷ Citing Tennyson's utopian wish in his poem 'Locksley Hall' (1835) for a 'Parliament of man, the Federation of the world', Fiske signs off by asserting that 'only when such a state of things has begun to be realized can civilization, as sharply demarcated from barbarism, be said to have fairly begun'.⁸

As Lawrence Buell has recently noted, the final decades of the nineteenth-century saw the promotion of 'Anglo-American kinship', often in the charged form of a 'militant Anglo-Saxonism, reinforced in the United States by the abandonment of Reconstruction and attendant decline of sympathy for black equal rights, combined with rising anxiety about the perils of immigration from central and southern Europe and from Asia'. In place of both an exceptionalist vision of New World writing and a belief in Old World authority, Buell notes how literary historians of the period began to prosecute 'a theory of American literature as a branch of English underpinned by scientific racist assumptions' of filiation.⁹ Fanny Trollope's patronising chronicle of Yankee vulgarities in *The Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) – the indictment included spitting, nosiness, pigs running free on the

streets of Cincinnati – was replaced by an acknowledgment that any American anxiety over postcolonial inferiority had given way to what the British journalist William T. Stead called, with no hint of nervousness, *The Americanization of the World*. His 1902 book of that name, a grandiose piece of global analysis that set out to identify the economic and political reach of the United States, quoted with approval his fellow London-based journalist, Fred Mackenzie, whose own analysis of turn-of-the-century capitalism pictures a transnational space of economic flow:

In the domestic life we have got to this: The average man rises in the morning from his New England sheets, he shaves with ‘Williams’ soap and a Yankee safety razor, pulls on his Boston boots over his socks from North Carolina, fastens his Connecticut braces... congratulates his wife on the way her Illinois straight-front corset sets off her Massachusetts blouse... At his office, he sits on a Nebraskan swivel chair, before a Michigan roll-top desk, writes his letters on a Syracuse typewriter, signing them with a New York fountain pen...¹⁰

The politics of national autonomy is here transformed into an incipient globalisation that Stead regards with approval, a hymn to an exceptionalist vision of the United States that, on balance, has revived and modernised a moribund, class-ridden Europe. In this it describes, of course, a Jamesian narrative of cultural contact and misunderstanding, but one that flattens out the nuances of reciprocity, modification and coercion that structure James’s version of the transatlantic relationship. For James, writing in 1904 (two years after Stead’s book), the world of American commerce, what he called the ‘vast crude democracy of trade’, could only ever deliver the mechanised vulgarity of ‘the new, the simple, the cheap, the common, the commercial, the immediate, and...the ugly’.¹¹

I’ll return to some of these adjectives in a while, but for now what it is worth noting that James had rehearsed these evaluations from *The American Scene* in a much earlier text, a

short story called ‘The Point of View’, first published in 1882. This is an epistolary tale that explicitly plays with the idea of national typologies. A cast of characters write to their correspondents (all but one of whom lives in Europe) offering their views on the United States as it is encountered either for the first time, in the case of an English MP and a French novelist, or after a significant period abroad, in the case of four returning American citizens. Louis Leverett, one of the repatriating exiles, is thoroughly Europeanised, lamenting Boston’s lack of what he calls ‘form’. ‘I don’t know what I shall do’, he writes to his friend, ‘I feel so undraped, so uncurtained, so uncushioned; I feel as if I were sitting in the center of a mighty “reflector.” A terrible crude glare is over everything.’¹² Leverett possesses the aestheticist sensibility that James had already perfected with Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Here, though, the characterisation is pushed in the direction of parody (‘undraped, uncurtained, uncushioned’ is a little too much), and Leverett is allowed to voice his contempt for American uniformity. ‘The people are very good, very serious, very devoted to their work; but there is a terrible absence of variety of type. Every one is Mr. Jones, Mr. Brown’, he complains. ‘They are thin; they are diluted in the great tepid bath of Democracy!’ Preferable by far, Leverett asserts, are the French and the Germans, with ‘the beauty of their ugliness, – the beauty of the strange, the grotesque.’¹³ Lined up alongside Leverett in the tale is the celebrated French novelist Gustave Lejaune, whose litany of American negatives could have been stolen from James’s own famous catalogue of New World absences in his biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Lejaune writes of Washington to his Parisian correspondent: ‘Naturally, no architecture (they make houses of wood and of iron), no art, no literature, no theater. I have opened some of the books... No form, no matter, no style, no general ideas; they seem to be written for children and young ladies.’¹⁴

In one of the few readings of the story, Michèle Mendelssohn notes its timely engagement with the philosophy of aestheticism that Oscar Wilde was then keenly

promulgating. She suggests that James's satirical depiction of Leverett anticipates his later distancing from what he regarded as Wilde's problematic morality.¹⁵ While this is certainly one aspect of 'The Point of View', more interesting to my mind is the tale's resistance to any kind of stable or maintained discursive position. Instead of settling for different strains of European exceptionalism, James places alongside these views those of Marcellus Cockerel, another returning American who chooses to embrace his national identity, feeling that he has 'the Future in his vitals'.¹⁶ 'Our salvation is here', he declares, 'if we have eyes to see it' (echoing an Emersonian insistence on refreshed vision).¹⁷ (265). Cockerel finds himself liberated from the social rigidities of Europe, and free too to embrace a national character regarded with disdain in the Old World. Specifically the idea of the vulgar, of vulgarity, is invested with renewed enthusiasm. He writes to his sister of 'big, familiar, vulgar, good-natured' American newspapers, and declares that 'I am very happy to have an early opportunity to announce to you that that idea [the idea of vulgarity] has quite ceased to have any terrors for me.' 'I have become terribly vulgar myself',¹⁸ he assures his correspondent, marking his American credentials in a way that Walt Whitman, for one, would have recognised. In his poem 'To Think of Time', first published in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman collapses the moral and cultural distinctions between 'The vulgar and the refined ... what you call sin and what you call goodness ... to think how wide a difference; / To think the difference will still continue to others, yet we lie beyond the difference'.¹⁹ Cockerell's nativist sensibility is placed in a discursive relationship with those less flattering judgements of the United States asserted elsewhere in the tale. The 'vulgar ... sounds'²⁰ emanating from a Harvard hotel that so disorient the Europeanised Louis Leverett are read alongside Cockerell's celebration of vulgarity as an American characteristic. 'The Point of View', then, is a story which refuses the comforts of plot or narrative drive, but which instead furnishes the reader with a series of meditations on national identity. The tale disperses its

consciousness across a textual field, allowing for the possibility of multiple, conflicting, and proliferating vantage points, what Sharon Cameron, in her reading of James, calls his staging of ‘conflicts’ that ‘become occasions for consciousness to proliferate, as in a dialogue which would keep going, or keep exchanging, not so much viewpoints held by consciousness as, more simply still, diverse manifestations of it’.²¹ ‘The Point of View’ exhibits a critical mobility that moderates between its own claims for coherence, as James in the 1880s finds himself at the centre of debates around transatlantic authorship and the role of the nation in establishing cultural capital. I want to suggest that it is in his eulogistic 1883 essay on Anthony Trollope that James starts to map for himself a conception of literary value that self-consciously tests its credentials against an explicitly cosmopolitan set of interlocutors. By the 1880s, the novel is, for James, an international project, not simply through the transatlantic mechanics of printing and reprinting, but also through its engagement with diverse literary antecedents and potentialities. Trollope, in many ways such a provincially *English* author, is the provocation for a wider mapping.

II

Two months after the appearance of ‘The Point of View’, on 22 February 1883 the recently-launched New York magazine *Life* printed a cartoon, called ‘The Literary Combination’, which showed an uncomfortable Henry James sitting on the shoulders of William Dean Howells, his fellow American novelist and man of letters. James is looking up at William Makepeace Thackeray, a figure whose seriousness and significance to English literary culture is signified here by his stance and stature. The accompanying caption provided the following exchange:

Howells: “Are you the tallest now?”

James (ignoring the question): “Be so uncommonly kind, H-w-lls, as to let me down easy. It may be that we both got to grow”²²

Over the years James would be the satirised target of a magazine which viewed with suspicion the kind of expatriate American identity he embodied and which articulated a clear rejection of the realist novel which he was perceived to advocate. As Martha Banta has noted, *Life*'s editors cultivated a middle-brow sensibility, ‘poised ... between the pomposity of the culture elite and the low tastes of the Philistine public’.²³ *Life* made clear that one of its primary concerns was to save good Americans from being swallowed up by the British cultural scene, or to critique Europeanised Americans who had lost touch with an indigenous tradition. It was also prepared, as the cartoon ‘A Literary Combination’ indicates, to knock down the literary pretensions of those practitioners of an aesthetic – realism - for which it felt little sympathy. (‘Realism’, the magazine lamented, ‘has taken the glory from fiction and poetry, and robbed life of its charm.’²⁴) The cartoon does more, though, than mock American novelists when faced with a monumental English giant, for, with one detail, it reveals its participation in a very specific literary debate, one that inaugurates, for James in the 1880s, a transatlantic vision of the novel’s cultural status.

That precise detail is the decision to have Howells and James stand on bound copies of the *Century* magazine. *Century* was an explicit advocate of American genteel capitalist culture, the dissemination of which, both through its contents and its advertising, would help distinguish home-grown qualities from those imported from Europe. In an essay from 1887 Richard Gilder, the *Century*'s editor, would ask: ‘Is there, or is there not, a greater delicacy and decency of speech in American than on the European continent? There are many who

believe that America has the purest society in the world. Is not this purity worth paying for with a little prudery?’²⁵ ‘Prudery’ interests me here, as it is suggestive of a kind of sexual moderation or continence that is valued as a marker of national distinction; Gilder’s image of the United States is one driven by middle-class values of respectability and propriety explicitly directed a transatlantic critique. As an editor he seems to have exhibited a peculiar combination of restraint and radicalism. He took care not to offend the moral principles of his readers (one contributor referred to the magazine’s owners as ‘the white company’, in reference to the cautiousness of the publication);²⁶ yet Gilder was also willing to provoke controversy and discussion (and, of course, sales) through the material he published. The provocation for the *Life* cartoon was an essay that Howells writes on James and which appeared in the November 1882 number of *Century*. The magazine was at the forefront of promoting the work of both men. (James’s story ‘The Point of View’ appeared within its pages, as did the serialisation of his novels *Confidence* and *The Bostonians*, and for Howells it was the publication of choice for four of his books, including *A Modern Instance* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.) Howells’s essay, titled simply ‘Henry James, Jr.’, has been accorded canonical status as one of the earliest serious engagements with James’s work. The major source of contention, which British journals picked up and reacted to, was Howells’s assertion that the modern art of fiction as practiced by James had displaced the work of outdated British masters such as Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope. James, writes Howells, ‘is shaping and directing American fiction... It is the ambition of the younger contributors to write like him; he has his following more distinctly recognizable than that of any other English-writing novelist.’²⁷ Howells provides an often acute analysis of James’s importance, but the transatlantic squabble that ensued, with British-based journals lining up to attack the temerity of both men, forced James into distancing himself from his friend’s ‘ill-starred amiabilities’,²⁸ and prompted another friend, Henry Adams, to observe: ‘I admit also to a

shudder at the ghastly fate of Harry James and Howells. The mutual admiration business is not booming just now. Between ourselves, there is in it always an air of fatuous self-satisfaction fatal to the most grovelling genius.²⁹ As Michael Anesko notes, Adams may have overstated the case here, but nevertheless his comment allows us to consider how Howells's proprietorship of James's reputation, one structured around notions of American distinctiveness, might damage the delicately cosmopolitan, transnational prism through which James viewed his fictional scene.

Implicit in the contemporary critiques of Howells's essay – and by extension also of James's own literary production – is irritation at New World hubris, the sense that the carefully crafted tradition of British literary history, with its solid accretions, was being threatened by a younger, immodest and immoderate American sensibility. A reviewer in *The Quarterly Review* accused both men of inhabiting a 'select circle of *puffistes litteraires*', with all the connotations of decadent self-aggrandisement in that, paradoxically, foreign phrase firmly intended.³⁰ I want to suggest that with the publication, in the July 1883 issue of the *Century*, of his essay on Anthony Trollope, James attempts to reposition his literary reputation along an axis that is more conducive to his sense of the novel as a transatlantic phenomenon, in which the migration and circulation of language, bodies, objects and manners is the subject of his fiction. As Susan Manning has argued, while '[t]he Atlantic is a topographical feature', with the addition of the prefix 'trans' 'it becomes a trope, ... a way of thinking about cognition through comparison'.³¹ To undertake this cognitive project, James deploys the figure of the recently-deceased English novelist as an object of scrutiny around which he can spin a series of critiques and evaluations that depend upon moderation, and its cognates and antonyms, as a structuring principle.

If William Dean Howells's essay pushes James too firmly into the territory of American exceptionalism, James's reading of Trollope (by triangulating a recently-dead,

much revered English novelist, an American journal, and his own internationalist sensibility) sought to demonstrate a more mobile form of cultural allegiance, one that, as we'll see, shifts its targets as forms of literary and cultural threat are identified. James's literary credentials received close scrutiny in another essay published in this same number of the *Century* magazine, a lengthy survey of the state of American letters since the Civil War written by James Herbert Morse, a popular lyric poet in his day but a figure now fallen out of view. The reading of James, in the immediate aftermath of the publication of his novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, is lukewarm, and what focuses Morse's critique is an apparent lack of authentic nationality: 'James is, in this respect, half a foreigner, or with a foreign taint, or – some would perhaps prefer to call it – tint, while Howells has the flavor of Ohio, which is lately modifying in a more intellectual atmosphere.' Later we read that James's writings are 'admirable studies of American manners as evolved in travel, that is, in contact with foreign manners, and of American limitations judged by a foreign standard; but they fail, it seems to me, to reach the spirit of home life or of any settled life'.³² Behind these words is a suspicion that the indigenous scene is being corrupted by a degenerative European incursion: the shift from 'taint' to 'tint', rather than removing the moral critique implied in the first word introduces a sense of racial anxiety in the second. It is Howells, and not James (despite Howells's protestations), who represents that 'modifying' impulse that brings American fiction back to its authentic senses, 'the spirit of home life' that Morse so values. While this essay has been lost to literary history, overshadowed by James's more celebrated piece a few pages later, it does nevertheless provide us with a useful set of co-ordinates which we see in operation once more, although different plotted, in James's estimation of Anthony Trollope.

III

This 1883 essay was not James's first evaluation of his subject, for some of his earliest critical notices reviewed Trollope's fiction. These pieces were uniformly hostile, and in places intemperate, in a manner that has led some critics, John Carlos Rowe for one, to speculate on the anxiety of influence that Trollope posed for his much younger rival: 'Trollope's enormous achievement as a Victorian novelist might well have intimidated the young Henry James', Rowe suggests.³³ If indeed it is intimidation, what this provokes are serial instances of immoderate prose. Of *Miss Mackenzie: A Novel* (1865), the twenty-two-year-old James writes: 'Mr Trollope's offence is, after all, deliberate. He has deliberately selected vulgar illustrations. His choice may indeed be explained by an infirmity for which he is not responsible: we mean his lack of imagination.'³⁴ Of *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865) – a title whose question James felt was not worth an answer – he declares that 'To Mr. Trollope all the possible incidents of society seem to be of equal importance and of equal interest. He has the same treatment, the same tone, for them all.'³⁵ Of *The Belton Estate* (1866), he judges that 'Our great objection ... is that, as we read it, we seemed to be reading a work written for children; a work prepared for minds unable to think; a work below the apprehension of the average man and woman, or, at the very most, on a level with it, and in no particular above it'.³⁶

It is worth remembering that at this time James had yet to publish his first novel, and he had only just seen his short stories appear in print. So the tone of these early reviews is accounted for partly by youthful enthusiasm and by the desire to carve a space for himself in a competitive literary marketplace. But I want to return to the accusation of vulgarity in James's review of *Miss Mackenzie* – that 'Mr Trollope's offence' is that he has 'deliberately selected vulgar illustrations'. We've noted already how James circles around an idea of the

vulgar in his story ‘The Point of View’. Vulgarity as an aesthetic and moral transgression increasingly preoccupied mid-Victorian critics; it was the word that most effectively conveyed the dangers of living in a nation ruled by the new wealth of commercial achievement. In the fifth volume of his *Modern Painters* (1860), for example, John Ruskin suggested that vulgarity entailed a loss of purity, often as a result of ill-breeding. He claimed that ‘vulgarity ... result[s] from prolonged, and especially from inherited conditions of “degeneracy,” or literally “un-racing;” – gentlemanliness, being another word for an intense humanity’.³⁷ As one critic has pointed out, that Ruskin could discuss the word ‘in almost eugenicist terms’ suggests that it ‘had become a sort of border control concept, placed in the service of perpetuating purity’.³⁸ One popular conduct manual from the period, *The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook for Ladies and Gentlemen* (1875), was, through its choice of analogy, even more explicit: ‘the great mixture of classes and the elevation of wealth, have thrust vulgarity even into the circles of good society ... like a black sheep in a white flock’.³⁹ Accusations of vulgarity, then, served as the mechanisms by which the social status quo could be enforced, and, as Trollope realised, the word stung when it was deployed. In his 1876 novel *The Prime Minister*, he devotes an entire chapter (chapter nineteen) to worrying about its force, as the eponymous Palliser accuses his wife of vulgarly transforming the family estate: ‘all was sheer display’, he judges, as he looks around him to see ‘some device for throwing away money everywhere’.⁴⁰ As we’ll see, vulgarity as a problem of breeding, as a failure of taste that manifests itself in a kind of promiscuity (‘throwing away money everywhere’) underwrites a central element of James’s assessment of Trollope himself. One final, more contemporary, theorisation of the term will help us sharpen some of the associations that matter most to James. Writing about impure, or vulgar, tastes, Pierre Bourdieu, in *Distinction*, his excavation of how taste is generated and controlled, offers a

comprehensive thesaurus of associations that move from the inconsequential to the morally troubling:

“Vulgar” works, as the words used to describe them indicate – “facile” or “light”, of course, but also “frivolous”, “futile”, “shallow”, “superficial”, “showy”, “flashy”, “meretricious”, or, in the register of oral satisfactions, “syrupy”, “sugary”, “rose-water”, “schmaltzy”, “cloying” – are not only a sort of insult to refinement, a slap in the face to a demanding (*difficile*) audience which will not stand for facile offerings...; they [also] arouse distaste and disgust by the methods of seduction, usually denounced as “low”, “degrading”, “demeaning”...

The force of vulgarity, Bourdieu proposes, lies in its constant threat to collapse the distance that refined aesthetics attempts to establish between the reader and the work of art. The object which ‘insists on being enjoyed’, he writes, ‘annihilates the distancing power of representation’. It ‘performs a sort of reduction to animality, corporeality, the belly and sex, that is, to what is common and therefore vulgar; removing any difference between those who resist with all their might and those who wallow in pleasure, who enjoy enjoyment’.⁴¹

James’s 1883 essay on Trollope wonders whether it might be possible to rescue this prolific Victorian novelist from his own fertile vulgarity (from the enjoyment of his own enjoyment).

By 1883, and on the back of the Howells controversy, James was more of an established figure who had claimed for his own particular property the fiction of contact between Europe and the United States. His success would be marked at the end of that year with the publication of a fourteen-volume ‘pocket size’ collected edition by Macmillan, organised around categories of cultural difference and exchange. The essay on Trollope, then, appears at a moment when James’s cultural capital is on the ascent, and the piece gives him

the opportunity to effect a self-staging of Anglo-American character. Trollope enables this performance both by serving as a warning against literary fecundity – a kind of textual incontinence - *and* as an exemplar of Anglo-Saxon moderation. James shifts and circles between these conceptualisations as he attempts to identify his own, carefully-attuned, cosmopolitan stance.

This is how the essay begins:

When, a few months ago, Anthony Trollope laid down his pen for the last time, it was a sign of the complete extinction of that group of admirable writers who in England, during the preceding half century, had done so much to elevate the art of the novelist. The author of *The Warden*, of *Barchester Towers*, of *Framley Parsonage*, does not, to our mind, stand on the very same level as Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot; for his talent was of a quality less fine than theirs. But he belonged to the same family – he had as much to tell us about English life; he was strong, genial and abundant. He published too much; the writing of novels had ended by becoming, with him, a perceptibly mechanical process. Dickens was prolific, Thackeray produced with a freedom for which we are constantly grateful; but we feel that these writers had their periods of gestation.⁴²

The opening sentence is deliberate in its declaration that a phase of literary life that has come to an end: with the passing of James's predecessors, a new incarnation of fiction is announced. The phrase 'complete extinction', of course, resonates with soundings of evolutionary exhaustion – of the disappearance of a species or type, something that will recur later on in the essay. Compared to James's earlier notices, this sentence suggests at least a level of sympathetic regard: Trollope is firmly in the past, but he has contributed to the

current standing of English fiction. But as becomes a characteristic feature of James's expository tactics in the essay, this position gets immediately modified as Trollope, although in the "same family" as the other novelists listed, does not rank alongside them in greatness. What is extinct, then, is a genus, maybe a race, and the death sentence that James passes sweeps away not only Trollope but also his more illustrious peers, Dickens, Eliot and the Thackeray of the *Life* cartoon. Invoked here is what Sara Blair has called a 'mobile post-Darwinian imaginary',⁴³ whereby the fact of literary extinction points to James's attempts to construct what he called, in a letter to his brother William from 1878, his own 'step by step evolution': 'It is something to have learned how to write', he asserts, '& when I look around me & see how few people (doing my sort of work) know how, (to my sense) I don't regret my step by step evolution'.⁴⁴ James's belief in the experimental nature of his writing project, and of himself as self-creating in the absence of a sympathetic peer group, underscores this sense of a new species of author emerging out of the evolutionary dead-end of the Victorian grandees.

The features of Trollope's writing career that concern James here are characterised by two distinct registers of vocabulary: the instrumentally mechanical and the immoderately fertile. James suggests that the promiscuous abundance of Trollope's literary life meant that his writing had no time to be self-consciously nurtured. The efficient rapidity with which Trollope's textual progeny were delivered allows James to introduce into his discussion what Blair describes as a 'subtle negotiation of race anxiety',⁴⁵ whereby excessive production leads to a decline in literary quality and viability. 'There was always in him a certain infusion of the common', James writes. He 'overworked' his gift, and 'rode his horse too hard'.⁴⁶ Of a character called Mr. Quiverful in Trollope's novel *Barchester Towers*, blessed with fourteen children, James sardonically notes: 'We can believe in the name and we can believe in the children; but we cannot manage the combination'. Again, Trollope's dissolution of talent is

brought about by excess, by a failure to exert a moderating discrimination over his material, so that the ‘common’ of, and in, his writing becomes evocative of a rapidly reproducing population; textual production of this kind is misdirected, and ultimately wasteful, as the metaphors of excessive progeny start to shade into something more self-pleasuring: ‘His practice, his acquired facility, were such that his hand went of itself, as it were, and the thing looked superficially like a fresh inspiration.’⁴⁷ That ‘as it were’ throws a knowing glance at us, something already prepared for by James revealing that Trollope was fond of telling his readers that he ‘could direct the course of events according to his pleasure’.⁴⁸ (*LC I* 1343).

Trollope’s literary excess – wasteful, masturbatory, lacking in the principles of moderating self-consciousness so crucial to James’s own aesthetic – resonates with a discourse of cultural exhaustion so prevalent in the 1870s and 1880s. What James describes as the ‘rather too copiously watered’⁴⁹ (*LC I* 1345) iterations of Trollope’s genius illustrates by implication the dangers to an Anglo-Saxon – indeed Anglo-American – culture of retrogression. Where, and in what form, and by whom cultural renewal will occur is of course the largely unstated autobiographical energy driving this essay. Indeed there is one moment where James almost writes himself into the argument. When discussing Trollope’s interest in transatlantic alliances in his fiction, he commends his awareness of American types, having ‘the air of being excellent, though not intimate’.⁵⁰ Then we read this, in the knowledge of James’s recently published *The Portrait of a Lady*:

The American girl was destined sooner or later to make her entrance into British fiction, and Trollope’s treatment of this complicated being is full of good humour and of that fatherly indulgence, that almost motherly sympathy, which characterises his attitude throughout toward the youthful feminine. He has not mastered all the springs of her delicate organism nor sounded all the mysteries of her conversation. Indeed, as

regards these latter phenomena, he has observed a few of which he has been the sole observer.⁵¹

James's credentials as the leading exponent of the international novel are here given an indirect airing: the nature of Trollope's relationship to his writing is, again, couched in terms of reproduction. He is both parents, or nearly both parents, with that 'almost motherly sympathy' a kind of forensic qualification that disrupts our sense of the kind of judgement being offered here. The 'delicate organism' of the American girl in Europe is too super-sensible for Trollope's utilitarian aesthetic, which prefers to invent the patterns of her speech rather than being attuned to its 'mysteries'.

The depiction I have been sketching here of Trollope as an incontinent libertine with multiple progeny, self-parenting or self-pleasuring, sits alongside an equally determined view of him as a thoroughly conventional Englishman, of a type more familiar to his readers and articulated through a vocabulary that could not be further away from the language of promiscuity. Trollope also, we are told, 'takes the good-natured, temperate, conciliatory view'. He represents 'in an eminent degree this natural decorum of the English spirit'.⁵² Tone here, of course, is everything, and the attributes that James assigns to his subject, when refracted through a different prism, might also be said to encode the kind of artistic provincialism that he writes against. However it would be a mistake to assume that these more temperate comments are simply extended performances of irony, for James's essay undertakes one further discursive shift towards its end. If up until now the focus has been on Trollope's textual progeny so as to diagnose an English literary culture in decline, with Trollope as the concentrated incarnation of dissipated vitality, the challenge posed by an avant-garde French novel tradition requires Trollope's rehabilitation, one in which the virtues of moderated openness, rather than the dangers of fecundity, are what James chooses to

stress. If Trollope, according to James, undermines the standing of the novel through his instrumentalisation of it in the literary marketplace, he nevertheless retains a distinctly ‘English’ – and therefore, to James’s Anglo-American magazine readers, culturally readable – tradition or habit of thought which emphasizes virtues of freedom, of the novel as a cultural form able to engage and remake orders of being and telling. Comparing Trollope with the realism of Emile Zola, James writes:

For Trollope the emotions of a nursery-governess in Australia would take precedence of the adventures of a depraved *femme du monde* in Paris or London. They both undertake to do the same thing – to depict French and English manners; but the English writer (with unsurpassed industry) is so occasional, so accidental, so full of the echoes of voices that are not the voice of the muse. [Zola and his peers], on the other hand, are nothing if not concentrated and sedentary.⁵³

This is a remarkable shift in James’s apportioning of value. Whereas the vocabulary of immoderate fertility until now has suggested an indiscriminate textual world, an idiom of repetitious excess endangering the cultural viability of the novel, here Trollope is commended for a liberality of perspective. ‘Occasional’, ‘accidental’, ‘full’ are all words invested with a sense that the novel should range across different terrains, embracing its own diverse potential, its own compendiousness, if it is to avoid what James calls the narrow ‘gimlet-like consideration’ of the French naturalists. Their focus, as James sees it, on urban depravity signifies a diminishment of the kinds of imaginative landscape that fiction can claim for itself.

James’s unease with the French attention to carnality is perhaps most explicitly revealed in a letter he writes, in French, to his friend, the novelist Paul Bourget, following the

publication in 1887 of Bourget's novel of Parisian infidelity *Mensonges* (translated as *A Living Lie*). James was not shy in issuing damning criticism of other people's work, and in this letter the judgement revolves around issues of moderation and a recoil from explicitness. Of one of the novel's characters, Mme Moraines (an older mistress to the young protagonist), James is most bemused by Bourget's attention to the markers of eroticism. He writes: 'vous lui consacrez, à elle et à son *underclothing*, une attention toute spéciale et toute malsaine'; and as the letter goes on it becomes clear that James associates sex with a proliferation – a promiscuity – of detail. His advice is that the writer should steer clear of 'le nombre des étreintes, leur qualité, l'endroit où ça se passe, la manière dont ça se fait, et mille autres particularités plus intensément personnelles et moins *produisibles* au jour que tout autre chose au monde'.⁵⁴ While this would seem to establish James as the embodiment of Anglo-American prudishness uncomfortable with the immoderate visibility and multiplicity of French sexual behaviour, I want to suggest that there is something more going on here than just anxious repression. Sex becomes a challenge to what and how fiction should represent. In the 1880s, at a moment where James is attempting to position himself in a complex triangulation of Atlantic affinities – not quite American, not quite British, not quite European – the erotic in literature is a touchstone around which he can begin to sketch a mode of authorship that avoids what he perceives to be the stale, obsessive repetitions of carnality. It might be possible, instead, to navigate a more complicated, unsettled, competing path between a European insistence on indiscriminate, vulgar transparency and a residual American moralism that might prefer sexual invisibility. In a lengthy retrospective essay on Zola, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1903, one year after the French novelist's death, James would revisit and re-enforce many of these ideas, recalling how he had once asked Zola about his future writing plans. In reply Zola had announced that he was about to begin a series called *Les Trois Villes*, focused on Lourdes, Paris and Rome. James, we are told, is left

‘gaping’ at this ambition, but the exchange also allows him to draw some important critical discriminations:

It flooded his [Zola’s] career, to my sense, with light; it showed how he had marched from subject to subject and had “got up” each in turn – showing also how consummately he had reduced such getting-up to an artifice... But was the adored Rome to be his on such terms...? One thought of one’s own frequentations, saturations – a history of long years, and of how the effect of them had somehow been but to make the subject too august. Was *he* to find it easy through a visit of a month or two with “introductions” and a Baedeker?⁵⁵

Zola’s writing, then, is too programmatic, lacking the kind of nuance and familiarity, the ‘frequentations’ and ‘saturations’ characteristic of the Jamesian aesthetic. As Peter Brooks puts it: ‘How dare Zola stake his claim on the equivalent of a one-night stand.’⁵⁶ By 1903 James had settled on a view of the Frenchman’s fiction as cripplingly professionalised, reduced to a methodology of acquired knowledge that generated reproducible templates of narrative – what he called Zola’s ‘magnificent treadmill of the pigeonholed and documented’.⁵⁷

James’s own practice, as I’ve been trying to suggest, operates according to very different criteria of evaluation. What is significant about his expository contortions around moderatism and its antonyms is that the deployment of such a language of value, whereby one form of fixed national or racial character (variously English, or Anglo-Saxon) is promoted over another (a narrowly-conceived notion of Gallic identity), is in the service of his own international, or Anglo-American, self-fashioning. Trollope’s energetic literary production is itself moderated, or revised: no longer a superficial libidinal impulse, it stands

instead for a kind of open, hospitable Anglo-Saxonism that opposes the constricting ‘artistic perversions’ of the French tradition.⁵⁸ (*LC I* 1335). In this essay James lays claim to having mastered the differences to be found in national traditions, thereby situating himself as the future of a genuinely transatlantic literary project. No longer Howells’s exponent of an *American* literary culture overtaking its British equivalent, James’s ambitions are wider and more transnationally conceived. He declares himself the heir to an English tradition within a publication preoccupied with American literary politics, having to negotiate differing conceptions of national destiny in order to suggest a genealogical realignment. The final sentences of the essay in the *Century* read like this: ‘His [Trollope’s] natural rightness and purity are so real that the good things he projects must be real. A race is fortunate when it has a good deal of the sort of imagination – of imaginative feeling – that had fallen to the share of Anthony Trollope. Our English race, happily, has much of it.’ The pronoun ‘our’ – ‘Our English race’ – is obviously key here, as James, an American citizen, insists to his largely American readers that he and they share a heritage that augurs well for the future of the novel. Theirs is an Anglo-American constituency that James has, of course, been instrumental in creating. When he came to revise the essay for publication in book form (it appeared in *Partial Portraits* in 1888), James changed his final line: ‘A race is fortunate when it has a good deal of the sort of imagination – of imaginative feeling – that had fallen to the share of Anthony Trollope; and in this possession our English race is not poor.’ One way of reading this change would be to note its apparent reduction of positive feeling – the shift from an English race ‘happily’ having ‘much’ to being ‘not poor’ diminishes future expectations. Yet, as Sara Blair has pointed out, there is also here a renewed emphasis on cultural value defined through a notion of ‘purity’, which gets echoed in the homophonic chiming of ‘pure’/‘poor’ right at the very end.⁵⁹ In order not to be culturally poor, there is the suggestion that one must be racially pure. Trollope, for all his immoderate, mechanical procreations, can be

recuperated for a temperate, flexible Anglo-Saxon tradition from which James simultaneously asserts and performs his own brand of literary internationalism.

James's prose thinks itself into being as it considers the implications of national allegiance and literary professionalism, of how and where to be an author. The discursive consciousness of his text is established, tested, and revised across its paragraphs, in ways that render its argument mobile and self-conscious. The American philosopher Stanley Cavell, himself a careful reader of Henry James's questing, self-questioning narratives, offers a resonant model for the experience of encountering a work of art. He is talking specifically about Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, but I want to suggest that it also captures a way of reading James *and* of experiencing James as a reader. One should attempt, Cavell writes,

to capture the sense at the same time of consulting one's experience and of subjecting it to examination, and beyond these, of momentarily *stopping*, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track: coming to attention. The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust.⁶⁰

Trollope's reputation – and by extension James's own - is made available for debate, for consultation, as James establishes in the 1880s the coordinates around which his project of cultural renewal is to be shaped. He contextualises himself within a complicated transnational space of affiliations and sympathies at a particular moment in his writing career. By reading the currents of his profession, he assesses the competition and stakes a claim for the kind of author he wishes to be through a comparative project that takes in the American, English and French literary scenes. Yet his prose remains flexible, even slightly tentative, never quite willing to settle into a critical position when a qualification or an elaboration beckons. This

kind of critical suppleness, a restlessness that moderates its own claims to coherence, demands a practice of reading that acknowledges the shifting pressures and mobile allegiances of literature, that chooses to pay attention to the ways in which texts can simultaneously collude with and resist convention, and that lets itself be surprised and delighted by how uncontainable writing can be.

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