

# Transforming Henry James



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Edited by

Anna De Biasio, Anna Despotopoulou,  
and Donatella Izzo

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P U B L I S H I N G

Transforming Henry James,  
Edited by Anna De Biasio, Anna Despotopoulou, and Donatella Izzo

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Editing a volume is a painstaking task, and sharing it with efficient, cooperative, and humorous friends makes a world of difference. The editors of this book, therefore, cheerfully acknowledge one another for transforming a potentially thankless job into a personally and professionally rewarding experience.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### Works by Henry James

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <i>AF</i>    | "The Art of Fiction"   |
| <i>AM</i>    | <i>The Ambassadors</i>   |
| <i>AN</i>    | <i>The Art of the Novel</i> , ed. Richard P. Blackmur  |
| <i>AS</i>    | <i>The American Scene</i>  |
| <i>CL</i>    | <i>The Complete Letters of Henry James</i> , ed. Pierre A. Walker and Greg Zacharias (volume number by date)                         |
| <i>CN</i>    | <i>The Complete Notebooks of Henry James</i>   |
| <i>CS</i>    | <i>Complete Stories</i> , Library of America editions  |
| <i>CT</i>    | <i>The Complete Tales of Henry James</i> , ed. Leon Edel, 12 vols.   |
| <i>DM</i>    | "Daisy Miller"   |
| <i>HJL</i>   | <i>Henry James Letters</i> , ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols.  |
| <i>HT</i>    | <i>Hawthorne</i>   |
| <i>IH</i>    | <i>Italian Hours</i>   |
| <i>LC1</i>   | <i>Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature; American Writers; English Writers</i> , Library of America edition                      |
| <i>LC2</i>   | <i>Literary Criticism. French Writers, Other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition</i> , Library of America edition |
| <i>LHJ</i>   | <i>The Letters of Henry James</i> , ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols.   |
| <i>LiL</i>   | <i>Henry James: A Life in Letters</i> , ed. Philip Horne   |
| <i>NSBMY</i> | <i>Notes of a Son and Brother and The Middle Years: A Critical Edition</i> , ed. Peter Collister                                     |
| <i>PC</i>    | <i>The Princess Casamassima</i>  |
| <i>PL</i>    | <i>The Portrait of a Lady</i>  |
| <i>PRL</i>   | "The Private Life"   |
| <i>RH</i>    | <i>Roderick Hudson</i>   |
| <i>RT</i>    | "The Real Thing"   |
| <i>SB</i>    | <i>A Small Boy and Others</i>  |
| <i>TS</i>    | <i>Transatlantic Sketches</i>  |
| <i>WWS</i>   | <i>William Wetmore Story and his Friends</i> , 2 vols.   |



## INTRODUCTION

## TRANSFORMATIONS

ANNA DE BIASIO, ANNA DESPOTOPOULOU,  
AND DONATELLA IZZO

For twenty-first-century readers and critics, “Transforming Henry James” may well seem a daunting task. Few authors have been canonized so thoroughly and authoritatively during most of the twentieth century, and few have undergone so many critical reconceptualizations during the decades that have followed. An author whose work seems “naturally” liable to being translated in terms of any number of theoretical metalanguages, Henry James has been subjected to an amazing range of critical reconfigurations over the last few decades.

It would seem, then, that there is hardly room for any further transformative acts. This volume undertakes to demonstrate that such is not the case. By gathering contributions from four continents and many different countries, we hope to make a convincing case for the ongoing productivity of James’s oeuvre when interrogated from new critical angles, and therefore for its enduring centrality to the concerns of literary and cultural studies. In its effort to reconnoitre the field in its emerging and even inchoate tendencies, this book certainly does not aim at offering an exhaustive, overall systematization of existing criticism; rather, it attempts a tentative inventory of some of its most exciting lines of development.

In our view, “Transforming Henry James” works in both possible senses suggested by the gerund: with “Henry James” as simultaneously the object being transformed by ever-renewed critical interventions, and the subject performing the transformation, that is, operating as the occasion sparking new conceptualizations, or as the touchstone and test case for exploring the implications and heuristic potential of critical approaches grounded in diverse theoretical discourses.

“Henry James,” here, is to be taken both as a synecdoche for his literary work and as an author figure. Indeed, the author’s comeback in

recent James criticism is one of the most striking and pervasive phenomena documented in this volume. The notion of “author” in this case should not be understood as merely an author function, the disembodied product of textuality or the endlessly reconfigured bearer of a symbolic capital in the literary and the scholarly field; it should be taken literally, as pointing to a specific historical individual whose concrete activity in the literary world and whose biography have been recently the object both of literary representation and of increasingly astute scholarly attention. This renewed interest in biography has certainly been fostered by the ongoing publication of Henry James’s *Complete Letters* (edited by Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias), which has made available to scholars a trove of new and fascinating information, but it also speaks to wider concerns. A tabooed presence in much New Critical, formalist, and post-structural criticism, the author’s biography has re-emerged in present-day literary studies not as the unquestioned “origin” of sanctioned meaning or the positivistic reservoir of factual proof capable of definitively anchoring interpretation, but rather as the locus where actual episodes and historically inflected cultural concerns, personal and professional stakes, outer and inner experiences, converge and become intelligible through rhetorical elaboration. Literary writing and the author’s biography—as both genesis and product of the author’s historically grounded subjectivity—thus stand in a complex relation of mutual construction and mutual elucidation to each other. Such a focus on James’s biography runs through many of the essays presented in this volume, regardless of their specific topic, and cuts across the individual rubrics under which contributions have been arranged, driving the diverse investigations of James’s life-long engagement with cities, places, and tourist sites, offering refractions of social and cultural history, intersecting with questions of textual philology, or enriching our understanding of textual and stylistic features of the author’s writings.

This emphasis on the author is not refuted but rather complemented by the volume’s focus on broad textual and cultural issues, suggested through the rubrics around which each group of essays is clustered. Pointing to the main concerns or trajectories of the essays’ critical interventions, these rubrics also signal the complex interrelations of Henry James as author and of the works he authored with a web of social, cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical discourses, which his works represent, explore, and critique, and which can be in turn represented, explored, and critiqued by way of his works.

Our first two parts exemplify a renewed consideration of place as a critical focus producing meaningful intersections of personal, cultural, and

literary dimensions. In the first group of essays, “Geographies of Memory and Belonging,” James’s sustained engagement with Europe, and more specifically with Rome and Paris, is re-read through his letters and essays as both an enabling moment in his individual self-definition and his literary production, and the problematic touchstone of the socially constructed quality of sites of memory, of national and cultural belonging or non-belonging, and of the challenges and limits of transnational reconfigurations of identity. Space, identity, and loss are the focal points around which the essays in the cluster gravitate, with a special stress on the role played by James’s voluntary delocalization to Europe in either articulating a modern sense of personal dispossession, essential to his artistic project, or distillating his particular narrative of an aesthetic life. As the place of choice that permits the consolidation of a life-long need of non belonging, counteracted by a simultaneous desire to be part of a national, social, and familial group (McWhirter), Europe affords James an understanding of himself as an outsider, mirrored in his observations about Italians both in Italy and in the United States, and accompanied by a sense of the irrecoverable losses involved in physical and cultural displacement (Banta). Rome, in particular, appears as a crucial stage for James’s early development: the newly published early letters allow Leland Person to reconstruct the correspondences between Roderick Hudson, in the eponymous novel, and the polarized feelings of visionary self-esteem and depressive self-distrust experienced by James during his Roman stay; they also offer Susan Gunter the ground for positing the influence exerted upon William’s later philosophy by Henry’s narrative of Rome as a pure, felt, continuous experience. Rome again takes center stage in Rosella Mamoli Zorzi’s analysis of the architectural destructions and reconstructions undergone by the city as the new capital of unified Italy, which James chose to ignore in his writings; while the long-lasting sense of urban destruction connected to the revolutionary history of Paris, as experienced by both James and his characters (Hyacinth Robinson, Lambert Strether), evidences an affective response to space as a site where multiple national and social histories and memories converge and which speaks through its absences just as much as it does with its presences (Coghlan).

Part II, “Literary Tourism,” engages questions of place and cultural memory from a different, specific angle: the recently established field of tourism studies, a critical discourse which explores the cultural implications of tourism—a social practice fully blooming in James’s time, to which he repeatedly bore witness both in his life and in his work. The “tourist gaze,” which constructs the tourist as a consumer of cultural sites, opens up questions of media and commodity culture, on the one hand, and,

on the other, of its imbrications with literature both at the level of rhetoric and theme, and as itself an object of consumption and a producer of consumer myths. By selecting a variety of case studies (from fiction, non-fiction, and biofiction) and perspectives, this group of essays explores a set of questions that are central to the theory of tourism, from the collection of consumable “signs” standing for the experience of the visited places, to the notion of “authenticity” as the unattainable goal of the modern traveler’s quest. A tourist himself and an author both repulsed by and attracted to the emerging phenomenon of the literary celebrity, James, in texts like “The Birthplace” and “The Papers,” is seen as vitally anticipating the tourist interest in the writers’ home that pervades today’s James bionovels and their semiotic codes (De Biasio), and satirically exploring the role of the press as pivotal in such a reconfiguration of literature as an exhibition of authors-as-tourist-attractions (G. Fusco). But, as other essays demonstrate, tourist discourse is also central to James’s own practices as a writer, as he either exploits its voyeuristic, keepsake lures in order to foster his notion of literature as art in the Prefaces to the New York Edition (Martinez) or uses his own tourist exposure to the complex reality of Italy to shape the idea of a relative, hybrid authenticity that informs his theory and practice of literature (Petrovich Njegosh).

Julie Rivkin’s essay evocatively recapitulates the issues debated thus far, providing a conceptual bridge between questions of the author’s presence, place, and tourism and the questions addressed in Part III, “Jamesian Friendship and Hospitality.” In her reading of a famous scene in *The Wings of the Dove* as the stage of an interpellation of casual tourists into aesthetic experience, Rivkin connects that Jamesian moment to questions of hospitality as conceptualized by Jacques Derrida. Exploring the paradoxical quality of borders—of texts and critical communities no less than individuals and nations—and of the hospitality an author extends to readers, Rivkin offers a reading of James’s “The Birthplace” as an allegory of the critic-reader’s taking residence in the author’s house, a kind of hospitality that is always simultaneously an infringement and a creative dwelling. The two essays that follow also revolve around friendship and hospitality, conceptualizing them not from a thematic but from a philosophical point of view to shed new light on their operation in the Jamesian world: Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is the main authority invoked in Collin Meissner’s interpretation of the value and function of friendship and its productive interconnection with James’s narrative aesthetics in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*, while Derrida and Levinas inspire Merle Williams’s reading of the varieties—and failures—of friendship and hospitality, as ethical and social categories, in



“A London Life,” “The Chaperon,” and *The Awkward Age*. Once famously described by T. S. Eliot as “a mind so fine that no idea could violate it,” Henry James has been having an intense commerce with philosophical ideas for some time now, as witness the attention his work has attracted from philosophers as diverse as Slavoj Žižek and Martha Nussbaum. The essays grouped in this section offer a fine sampling of literary readings of James through a philosophical lens, a promising development in James criticism, in view of how germane James’s concerns prove to be with those of much contemporary philosophy.

Late twentieth-century philosophy and social sciences also undergird the next two parts. Part IV, “Jamesian Sexualities,” capitalizes on recent reconceptualizations of gender, sexuality, and identity to offer new readings of well-known James texts in light of their unsettling of sex and gender normativity. Case studies range from *The Bostonians*, where close textual analysis shows the way in which stylistic devices such as free indirect discourse are systematically used to destabilize the absolute value of heterosexual marriage, which the novel’s ending upholds (Walker); to *The Awkward Age*, whose complex verbal and sexual negotiations create a system of commodified heterosexual exchange that Nanda evades, in Alan Nadel’s reading, by masterminding her own unmarriedability in order to preserve her closeted sexual orientation; to “The Beast in the Jungle,” where May Bartram’s life-long involvement in John Marcher’s wait for the “beast” is read as the result of an ambivalence about compulsory heterosexuality—a self-aware mask for her reluctance to participate in that order, rather than a selfless immolation to Marcher’s needs (Petty). While most of the essays in this section build on Eve Sedgwick as their implicit or explicit interlocutor, Beth Ash weaves a dialogue with Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation of Kate Croy as the true ethical actor in *The Wings of the Dove*, proposing instead that the novel’s ethic of sacrifice be read through the sexualized filter of hysteria, a denial of carnal love that is a flight from—rather than a critique of—the exploitative social and sexual relations portrayed in the novel. Questions of gender and sexuality also emerge in Paul Fisher’s exploration of James’s connection with Henrietta Reubell, *The Ambassadors’* Miss Barrace, which proposes new insights into James’s literary transfiguration of episodes and figures belonging to his queer milieu.

Part V, “Reframing James’s Social World,” multiplies the trajectories of critical investigation, expanding the focus from the social regulation of sexuality to a concern with the overall operation of society. The underlying logic of capitalist developments in his time is foregrounded in Nan Da’s analysis of the convergence between the future-oriented

temporality of financial speculation and the narrative logics of *The American*. Manuela Vastolo's Bourdieusian analysis of class in "The Pupil" minutely reconstructs the articulated operation of different types of capital in the nuanced social space of the story. In her reading of "Paste," Maya Higashi Wakana adopts a microsociological approach to highlight the wider significance of the questions of value and authenticity raised in the story, whose import extends to the morality of daily interactions on the social stage. Engaging James's work from a variety of innovative points of view, these essays show the productivity of their original approaches and, by implication, demonstrate James's remarkably astute understanding of the complexities of the modern social world.

The essays collected under the rubric "Jamesian Narrative and Textuality," in Part VI, address traditional concerns of James scholars, such as character, style, and textual revision, from the vantage point of new critical and theoretical developments in James studies. These include the renewed interest in textual philology induced by current work on new James editions—here showcased in Michael Anesko's brilliantly iconoclastic reconstruction of the Master's practices as a professional author, reviser, and proof-reader—as well as the emergence of sophisticated deconstructive and anti-mimetic approaches to such narratological or stylistic elements as character and tropes. Seen as productive rather than reproductive, tropes deploy their agency in shaping the plot rather than illustrating it, as shown in Sheila Teahan's reading of James's early "The Story of a Year." Stylistic analysis thus proves crucial to an understanding not just of verbal texture, but also of character, seen as an antipsychological construct existing on the surface of language rather than in an assumed ontological depth (Mitchell); such a recurrent trope of James's late style as disavowal thus reveals an inherent dialogism, pointing to the intersubjective quality of subject formation and to the subject's attempt to evade an internalized social law (McBride). Finally, Melanie Ross's analysis of the complexities of James's "oral phase," weaving together his transition from writing to dictating with his relation to his mother by way of a reading of James's essays on George Du Maurier, is exemplary of a whole new departure in James criticism, an attention to the intersections between the written and the oral/aural dimension in James's prose.

Long restricted to identification and interpretation of the author's allusions to traditional paintings and artifacts in his work, the emphasis on James's visual dimension now includes modern phenomena, such as the new medium of photography, exploring their social and cultural as well as their aesthetic implications. The essays in Part VII, "Visuality in/and

Henry James,” are representative of James’s combined interest in modernity and in the multifaceted domain of the visual. James’s fascination for Holbein’s use of the optical device of anamorphosis is reconnected with the larger transformations occurring in the visual urban culture of the late nineteenth century, especially as mirrored in the ethical tangles of *The Ambassadors* (Dougherty); while the socio-cultural investment in representation, in “The Real Thing” and “The Private Life,” is analyzed in terms of its semiotic reproduction of the conflation of private and public, of individual and collective identities operated by photography (S. Fusco).

James believed that the creation of good fiction depended on a writer’s power to transform a glimpse into a picture, impressions into experience, the simplest surface into depth, and elusive substance into writing. Such transformative acts, he says in “The Art of Fiction” (1884), “can never [be] learn[ed] in any manual; it is the business of [the author’s] life” (195), but only if this author is responsive to the subtle “implications of things,” not just the things themselves (195). Similarly, the business of the good critic’s life, according to “The Science of Criticism” (1891), is an act of transformation, one that results from the melding of “second-hand” life (*that* encountered in the house of fiction) with first; “he deals with the experience of others, which he resolves into his own” (294). Like the author, the critic must have “perception at the pitch of passion and expression as embracing as the air” (293) in order to transmute the finer threads of fiction (mingled with his/her own experience) into critical discourse, in a way that does justice to both. James’s essay stipulates the respect that the critic must show for the author’s choice of subject, but at the same time it grants the true critic freedom to “lend himself” and “to project himself” to the object of criticism (293). From the encounter between author and critic who answer to James’s criteria, there can only emerge a relationship of mutual transformations—which is what we hope this volume may achieve.

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**PART I:**

**GEOGRAPHIES OF MEMORY  
AND BELONGING**

CHAPTER ONE

YOUNG HENRY JAMES:  
THE OUTSIDER

DAVID MCWHIRTER

The title of this essay, not to mention its focus on Henry James's early letters, signal something of a departure for a scholar who has, for many years, worked almost exclusively on *old* Henry James—the post-1895 James, that is, of the experimental, major and so-called “fourth” phases. With my center of intellectual gravity originally located in British modernism, it's probably not surprising that the nineteenth-century American James has been more often than not peripheral to my vision. And yet the child is, after all, father to the man. The “Master” who spent several years late in life revisiting, rethinking, and revising his own youthful avatars for the New York Edition was also engaged in a sustained meditation on the pieties, natural and otherwise, that bind age to youth. As James himself remarked at the beginning of his autobiographical fragment *The Middle Years*,

we are never old, that is we never cease easily to be young, for *all* life at the same time: youth is an army, the whole battalion of our faculties and our freshnesses, our passions and our illusions, on a considerably reluctant march into the enemy's country, the country of the general lost freshness; and I think it throws out at least as many stragglers behind as skirmishers ahead—stragglers who often catch up belatedly with the main body, and even in many a case never catch up at all. (*NSBMY* 410)

Contemplating in 1914 events that occurred some forty-five years earlier, including the death of Minny Temple and his own first extended exposure as an adult to Europe, and to his beloved Italy, James recalls “agitations, explorations, initiations . . . which I should call fairly infantine . . . had they not still more left with me effects and possessions that even yet lend themselves to estimation.” As a late novel like *The Wings of the Dove*

testifies, the apparently closed “volume” of one’s youth—in this case, both Minny and Italy—may nonetheless remain “either completely agape or kept open by a fond finger thrust in between the leaves” (*NSBMY* 410).

The immediate occasion for my turn to young Henry James, and more specifically here to the early letters, has been my immersion in editing *Roderick Hudson* for the Cambridge *Complete Fiction of Henry James*, a project for which *The Complete Letters of Henry James*, edited by Pierre Walker and Greg Zacharias, and now inclusive of James’s letters up through December 1877—a year after his permanent settlement in London—has proven invaluable. Zacharias also gets credit for provoking this paper in a more immediate sense, however, by way of his expressed opinion, over breakfast at a conference in Paris in October of 2010, that James’s intellectual frameworks were pretty much set by the time he was thirty. My first reaction, I confess, was something along the lines of “How could that be?” James, to me, is always and endlessly revisionary, always ready to rethink what he just thought, our essential modern novelist precisely because he was acutely, if anxiously, responsive not only to his era’s changing attitudes toward gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity, but also to changing conditions of literary production and reception, to the rise of consumerism and mass culture, and to the emergence of new technologies and media—responsive, that is, in the fullest sense to the material and historical conditions that in his time determined new, specifically modern forms of experience, desire, and subjectivity. Is the James who wrote *What Maisie Knew* or *The Golden Bowl* or “The Beast in the Jungle” really operating from the same intellectual assumptions as the author of *Roderick Hudson*? But a close reading of the early letters suggests that Zacharias is more right than wrong, and in more ways than one. In terms of ideas, of basic principles and positions, social, political and aesthetic, the James who went to school on Arnold, Ruskin, and Sainte-Beuve, who “risked” Mill and Pater, who positioned his own art in relation to the traditions of British and American romanticism, the English novel, the old masters, and the French realist works he devoured as a young man, is entirely recognizable to a student of the later James. Politically (though not excessively) conservative, discriminating but fairly conventional in matters of taste, not especially interested in, and more than a little hostile to, the religious dimensions of his father’s thinking—for a student of later James, there’s nothing especially surprising in the young Henry who emerges here.

But James, as T. S. Eliot long ago recognized, was not fundamentally a man of ideas.<sup>1</sup> In a well-known 1863 letter to his friend Thomas Sargeant Perry, a twenty-year old James argues in uncharacteristically strong,

sustained, and philosophical terms that “prejudice is one of the worst evils which afflict humanity,” before going on to define prejudice as “a judgement formed on a subject upon *data* furnished, not by the subject, itself, but by the mind which regards it.” “These *data*,” James continues,

are the fruits of the subtlest influences,—birth, education, association. Unless carefully watched they insinuate themselves into every opinion we form. They grow to be the substance of our very being. So far are they from being subjects of consciousness that they almost become vehicles thereof. . . . They are so intimately connected with every mental process, that they insidiously pervert our opinions, discolour and distort the objects of our vision. The opinion is consciously formed, perhaps; but not appreciatively, critically.<sup>2</sup>

James self-deprecatingly (and characteristically) invites Perry to “supply a query after every assertion and enclose the whole in a great parenthesis & interrogation point, or even scratch it all out” (*CL* 1855-72 1: 83). But his distrust of prejudice in its literal sense of pre-judgment—“this fatal obliquity of vision” (83), James calls it—is a note sounded frequently throughout the early letters, in his dislike, for example, of James Russell Lowell’s too many “*opinions*” (*CL* 1872-76 1: 144), or his objection, in his letters to Charles Norton, to forms of criticism dependent on moral or aesthetic principles, “precepts” and “preaching” rather than “the impression of an intelligent observer.” “I should be sorry,” he tells Norton, ever to write anything which mightn’t suggest a question of its being right or wrong, at points” (*CL* 1872-76 1: 251, 140).<sup>3</sup> And indeed, what strikes me most forcefully about the James of these six volumes is how consistently he articulates and enacts his felt need to distance himself from those “subtlest influences” of birth, education, and association that underwrite prejudice and pre-judgment, which is to say from the familial, social, and national contexts to which he was in so many ways deeply attached, but which he also instinctively understood as an impediment to the pleasures and purposes of appreciation, the *un*-prejudiced “attitude of observation,” he most valued (*CL* 1855-72 2: 332). When James expresses his reservations about Lowell and Norton he is echoing his even earlier rebellion, recalled in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, against his father’s intellectual rigidities: “My father had terms, evidently strong, but in which I presumed to feel, with a shade of irritation, a certain narrowness of exclusion as to images otherwise—and oh, since it was a question of the pen, so multitudinously!—entertainable” (143). And when he writes to his father in 1872, predictably primed to lament the “changes” and “modernized air” of post-unification Rome but nonetheless insistent that



"It all promises me great pleasure, however, & I shan't prejudge" (*CL* 1872-76 1: 163), he is foreshadowing Lambert Strether's refusal to adhere to Woollett's pre-conceptions—about Paris, and about the meaning and value of Chad and Madame de Vionnet's "attachment." Early and late, Henry James instinctively recognized and resisted "the vanity of the *a priori* test" (*LC* 2 1122).<sup>4</sup>

The letter that opens the first volume of the *Complete Letters*, addressed to one Edgar Van Winkle, by a no-more-than twelve-year-old Henry James, reads as follows: "Dear Eddy. As I heard you were going to try to turn the club into a Theatre. And as I was asked w'ether I wanted to belong here is my answer. I would like very much to belong. Yours truly H James" (*CL* 1855-72 1: 3). But the James of the early letters is in truth persistently, deeply ambivalent about belonging—an ambivalence that is mixed up with, and sometimes, I think, obscured by, James's gradual but steady movement towards his decision to live in Europe rather than America. In his letters back home written during his European sojourns of the late 1860s and 1870s—which constitute, it's worth pointing out, the great bulk of his early epistolary output—James repeatedly describes himself as a "lonely & crabbed exile" (*CL* 1872-76 3: 165), "abjectly, fatally homesick" (*CL* 1855-72 1: 224), and complains about his "solitary single life" and "solitudinous" existence—especially, as he remarks to William, "the lonely feeding" (*CL* 1872-76 2: 152, 159). Writing from Geneva, he expresses his frustration with "the uncompromising, incomprehensible foreign-ness of things" that makes him "feel like the denizen of another planet" (*CL* 1855-72 2: 31). He bemoans what he described a few years later as "the mere surface-relation of the Western tourist to the soil he treads" ("At Isella" 614)<sup>5</sup> and "the apparent inaccessibility of the Natives" on the continent (*CL* 1855-72 2: 220). "I feel," he writes, "very much like a traveller & desire extremely to feel less so" (*CL* 1872-76 3: 44); and in an 1873 letter to William he regrets, apropos of Paris, "never having a chance to exchange a word with a typical Frenchman. . . . [T]here grew to be something irritating at last in this perpetual humiliating sense of ungratified curiosity" (*CL* 1872-76 2: 178). Contemplating a summer in England, he notes that "the principle drawback I see to going there—to going anywhere in fact—is the possible—not to say probable dearth of society. . . . I get a strong feeling, while in England, of the degree to which to a lonely & unassisted man society must remain obstructed & closed" (*CL* 1855-72 2: 220). To Howells James writes, "what is the meaning of this destiny of desolate exile—this dreary necessity of having month after month to do without our friends for the sake of this arrogant old Europe which so little

befriends us?" (CL 1872-76 1: 326). "I am a stranger in the land"; "I form no intimacies" (CL 1872-76 3: 75-6, 79).

Yet, James, it seems clear, doth protest too much; what I in fact want to argue here is that young Henry James, for all his genuinely-felt homesickness, in some real sense *wanted* to be alone. He laments his "exile" to Howells even as he tries to get his parents to underwrite a few more months of it. Back home in Cambridge at the end of 1874, he tells his brother Bob that "home seems very pleasant, after the lonely, shiftless migratory life I have been leading these two years," all the while plotting his return to his "migratory life" in Europe (CL 1872-76 2: 197). Longing for society, James also—and hilariously—avoids it: "Every one seems to be in Rome & I constantly pass in the street carriage loads of people I know. But I fix a stony stare on some merciful column or statue: for life is too short to go to see them all" (CL 1872-76 1: 228). If James, in other words, sometimes regrets his inability to "belong" in Europe—"I should like living here," he writes from London in 1875, "if I belonged to a club & were in society" (CL 1872-76 3: 7)—part of Europe's attraction for young Henry, an attraction that would soon land him in London once and for all, is that it's a place where he doesn't *have* to belong in the fullest senses of the word. There is, as who should say, "detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference" (AM 18). To "go [to England] and be left wholly to my own resources" might be "dreary," but it also "might be very pleasant" (CL 1855-72 2: 220). "Ungratified curiosity" about French society is part and parcel of the pleasures of Parisian *flânerie*: "the mere daily and hourly spectacle of human life in Paris," James writes to William, "is greatly suggestive & remunerative" (CL 1872-76 1: 178). It is worth remarking, too, that young Henry's epistolary outpourings to his family, while certainly a sign of his love and profound attachment, were also a product of the distance his travels necessarily imposed. As the absence of letters to family members in 1875, a year Henry spent back in America, testifies, one writes when one is far away. In the 1869 letter addressed to "My dearest Daddy," where he complains of "the cheerlessness of solitude and the bitterness of exile," James notes that

the dusk has fallen upon my small and frigid apartment and I have lit my candle to warm my fingers—as I begin this letter to warm my thoughts. Happy Florence is going to dine *en famille* & to enjoy the delights of mutual conversation.—Well; so be it; it's something to have a *famille* to write to if not to dine & converse with. (CL 1855-72 2: 157)

Perhaps all writing shares something of this ambivalence, the desire to belong always tangled up with the longing to be separate, the simultaneous

need to be a part of and apart from—a double gesture of intimacy and detachment. It won't surprise readers of the early letters that the James who set out, late in life, to write a "Family Book," and who described himself in a 1912 letter to his namesake nephew as "becoming, at every step of my process, more intensely 'Family' even than at the step before" (qtd. in Holly 3)<sup>6</sup> was also the James who would recall, in that same Family Book, his persistent childhood fantasy of being orphaned:

Parentally bereft cousins were somehow more thrilling than parentally provided ones . . . I think my first childish conception of the enviable lot, formed amid these associations, was to be so little fathered or mothered, so little sunk in the short range, that the romance of life seemed to lie in some constant improvisation. . . . My first assured conception of true richness was that we [James and his siblings] should be sent separately off among cold or even cruel aliens in order to be there thrillingly homesick. Homesickness was a luxury I remember craving from the tenderest age—a luxury of which I was unnaturally, or at least prosaically, deprived. (*SB* 15-16)<sup>7</sup>

James's letters home consistently convey this mixture of emotions, akin to those experienced by the young Isabel Archer as she listens, in self-chosen exile, to "the hum of childish voices repeating the multiplication table" wafting from the across-the-street Albany school she has refused to attend—"an incident in which the elation of liberty and the pain of exclusion were indistinguishably mingled" (*PL* 32).<sup>8</sup> And the weird temporality of nineteenth-century transatlantic epistolary culture, where letters bounce around Europe for weeks in search of a peripatetic addressee, arriving in Rome just as he leaves for Paris or Bremen, indeed occasionally vanishing altogether, and where correspondence more often than not means writing a letter to someone who has written to you but whose letter you have yet to receive, itself often works to fracture the bonds of intimacy letter-writing is ostensibly meant to reinforce. "Dear Father," begins an 1876 letter to Henry Sr.:

I wrote to you—or at least to Alice, not many days since from the South—that is from Biarritz. Yesterday I arrived in Paris, hoping to find letters from home & was deeply grieved at having handed me, in response to my much-deferred longing, nothing but the circular of my wood-merchant of last winter. My last letter is still mother's note of August 16<sup>th</sup>, enclosing Wm's letter of distress from Saratoga. So that I don't know the end of that episode—or of anything else. (*CL* 1872-76 3: 182)

Writing to one of his dearest friends, Grace Norton, in 1869, in response to

a month-old letter from her, and noting that she will probably see him in the flesh before she receives the very letter he is composing, James jokes that “so many things have happened to both of us that you are probably no longer the person who wrote it nor I the creature to whom it was addressed” (*CL 1855-72 2*: 236). Five years later in another, less buoyant letter to Norton, Henry acknowledges not having wanted to answer her last, “sad” communication: “In fact, I’m not answering it now. But do we, in . . . writing, ever really answer each other? Each of us says his limited personal say out of the midst of his own circumstances, & the other one clips what satisfaction he can from it” (*CL 1872-76 2*: 114).

In an 1872 letter to William, Henry acknowledged, partly in response to deepening family concerns about the second son’s growing detachment from America, that “I enjoy very much in a sort of chronic way which has every now & then a deeper throb, the sense of being in a denser civilization than our own. Life at home has the compensation that there you are a part of the civilization, such as it is, whereas here you are outside of it. It’s a choice of advantages” (*CL 1872-76 1*: 144-45). And an appreciation of the advantages of *not* belonging, of being “outside of it,” is, I would argue, crucial to James’s understanding of himself and his art, in youth *and* in maturity. James’s “Dear Eddy” letter (“I would like very much to belong”) needs to be read alongside his report, in an 1872 missive to Charles Norton, that Wendell Holmes, his brother William, and “various other long-headed youths have combined to form a metaphysical club, where they wrangle grimly & stick to the question. It gives me a headache merely to know of it.—I belong to no club myself . . .” (*CL 1855-72 2*: 438). And it’s worth remembering, in this connection, that James’s famous remark, in an 1867 letter to Perry, “that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture” is premised on a conviction that “we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely”—without prejudice, one might say—“with forms of civilisation not our own”:

To have no national stamp has hitherto been a defect & a drawback; but I think it not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate that a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various national tendencies of the world is the condition of more important achievements than any we have seen. (*CL 1855-72 1*: 179-80)

America’s cultural value and promise, in other words, are products of its failure or reluctance to demand, as German or French national identities demand, the commitments, and consequent limitations, of belonging. In this sense, we might well reread James’s self-exile from his native land—

his rebellion against the limitations of belonging to or being “stamped” by American national culture—as itself a quintessentially American gesture, his own way of lighting out for the territory. To put this another way, if James instinctively resisted the defining “stamp” of American-ness, he also recognized in it elements that would prove an “excellent preparation” not only for “culture,” but for the cosmopolitan stance he was already busy assuming. As he would write in an 1878 essay, “Occasional Paris”:

It is hard to say exactly what is the profit of comparing one race to another, and weighing in opposed groups the manners and customs of neighbouring countries; but it is certain that as we move about the world we constantly indulge in this exercise. This is especially the case if we happen to be infected with the baleful spirit of the cosmopolite—that uncomfortable consequence of seeing many lands and feeling at home in none. . . . Being a cosmopolite is an accident, but one must make the best of it. If you have lived about, as the phrase is, you have lost that sense of the absoluteness and the sanctity of the habits of your fellow-patriots which once made you so happy in the midst of them. You have seen that there are a great many *patriae* in the world, and that each of these is filled with excellent people for whom the local idiosyncrasies are the only thing that is not rather barbarous. There comes a time when one set of customs, wherever it may be found, grows to seem to you about as provincial as another; and then I suppose that it may be said of you that you have become a cosmopolite. (“Occasional Paris” 721)<sup>9</sup>

James would, of course, in the long run settle permanently in England; he would belong to several clubs; he would maintain close and deep ties to his family, and enjoy numerous, long-lasting, cherished friendships. But he would also keep his distance, adopting a cosmopolitan vision and an attitude of “cheerful, sociable solitude,” akin to Lambert Strether’s (*AM* 61), that are demonstrably under construction in the years documented by the early letters. There is, of course, one additional dimension to James’s reluctance to belong, especially in America, where the regime of compulsory heterosexuality and marriage, enforced by family and society alike, was undoubtedly strongly felt. The distance of Europe allowed James, at least initially, to feign compliance with but also stage a withdrawal from a sex/gender system he would ultimately renounce in favor of life abroad as “an artist and a bachelor” (*CN* 28). Of “Mme de Rabe, née Crawford, with whom nowadays one has to converse in French, as her husband knows no English,” he remarks that “I never wanted to marry her, surely, but I don’t care for her so much now that another man has done so” (*CL* 1872-76 2: 164-65). Mrs. Effie Lowell, we’re told, “is a ravishing woman & I came within an ace of falling wholesomely in love

with her" (*CL* 1872-76 2: 170). To Alice he explains that "I must close—I am going to dine with Mrs. Strong—I believe all alone!—& 'tis 7 o'clock. Don't think that I adore Mrs. S. or have *velléités* of flirtation with her: j'en suis à 1000 lieues" (*CL* 1872-76 3: 122). On hearing of Minny Temple's death he writes (this time to William) that "my own personal relations with her were always of the happiest. Every one was supposed I believe to be in love with her: others may answer for themselves. I never was . . ." (*CL* 1855-72 2: 342). Some years later, the news of Perry's marriage to Lila Cabot provokes the comment, in a letter to his parents, that "my memory of Miss Cabot has been somewhat dimmed by absence; but I don't think I should have chosen her myself" (*CL* 1872-76 1: 323). As Millicent Bell shrewdly observes in her introduction to the 1872-76 letters volumes, James's turn toward Europe is partly a reflection of the "widening separation from the circle of friends of which he and Minny had been a part, a severance from his own American generation whose members"—including brothers Robertson and Wilkie—"had begun to make marriages," leaving him "outside their own privacies of sex and parenthood" (*CL* 1872-76 1: xxiv). Yet this outsider status was also clearly a choice. James's mother, sensing her favorite son's growing desire to slip the family, national, and hetero-normative knots, urges him, if he insists on living in Europe, to "take a wife"; he jokingly responds that "if you will provide the wife, the fortune, and the 'inclination' I will take them all" (*CL* 1872-76 2: 175). But James was grasping something essential about himself when he wrote, in a famous 1880 letter to Grace Norton, that he was "unlikely ever to marry. . . . One's attitude toward marriage is a part—the most characteristic part, doubtless—of one's general attitude toward life" (*HJL* 2: 314). If some dim acknowledgment or even, it may be, deliberate concealment of his own sexual identity is at play in this pronouncement, it is perhaps best understood as a clear articulation of the choices young Henry had been making all along, of the ground of distance, detachment, and non-belonging upon which he had steadily built the life he preferred, and which he also understood early on as foundational to his aesthetic.

I want to be very clear here: I am *not* suggesting that James's sexuality is the underlying cause of his life choices or loneliness, or that his outsider's stance is merely a symptom of his (presumably) homosexual orientation, or even an effect of the inevitable guardedness of the closet. Rather, I read James's ambivalence about socially dominant *relational* structures and institutions—the nuclear family; marriage; the couple—as one more example of his characteristic, never unequivocal, but ultimately positive resistance to the commitments and consequent limitations of