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“The Formidable Question”: James’s Transatlantic View of the South

As many Jamesians know, the first part of my title comes from Henry James’s *The American Scene* (1907), the book which James wrote on the subject of his native land when he went back to the USA in 1904, after a European absence of more than twenty years (1883-1904).

The American Scene has come very much to the fore in James studies in the past twenty to twenty-five years. It has removed James from his “ivory tower,” making his readers aware of how much he was involved in the social scene. “The Master” of psychological inquiry showed, with *The American Scene*, how much he cared for America, and how involved he was in its changes. It is also a book that, as is commonly acknowledged,¹ has embarrassing chapters, – such as the one on the Jews of the New York Lower East Side, full of unacceptable racist animal imagery – and a book which, at the same time, shows James facing the question of the “American identity,” changing under the pressure of the advent of millions immigrants (Mamoli 285-287). In *The American Scene* these immigrants are consistently called “the alien” – certainly a derogatory term – but their challenge to the American identity is accepted by James, who probed into this unwelcome question. Feeling challenged by the “aliens” in his American identity, James was not content with simply discarding the “new.” He did declare that the Americans belonging to the old WASP stock (WASP, although he was of Irish stock) must “go . . . *more* than half way to meet” (*AS* 86) the immigrants, that is, he underlined the necessity to make a big effort and recognize the new American identity.

The questioning of the American identity is a central theme in the book and it makes *The American Scene* most relevant for us in Europe today, when we have been facing a constant flow of immigration,

which will only increase in the future, as long as differences between rich and poor countries exist.

Now let us look at the context of these three words. When James went back to the USA, he visited several parts of the country he had never visited before. He went to Washington, which he knew, and to Richmond, to Charleston and Savannah, to Florida, which he did not know.

In Washington he seems to have faced the tragic question of race for the first time after his return to his native land. In Washington, he wrote:

I was waiting in a cab, at the railway station, for the delivery of my luggage after my arrival, while a group of tatterdemalion darkies lounged and sunned themselves within range. To take in with any attention two or three of these figures had surely been to feel oneself introduced *at a bound to the formidable question, which rose suddenly like some beast that had sprung from the jungle.*

These were its far outposts; they represented the Southern black *as we knew him not, and had not within the memory of man known him, at the North;* and to see him there, ragged and rudimentary, yet all portentous and “in possession of his rights as a man,” was to be not a little discomposed, was to be in fact very much admonished. (*AS* 375) (my emphasis)

What is so striking in these paragraphs is the violence of the metaphor James used. The metaphor of the *beast, springing up, at a bound, from the jungle*, is very strong and it is also well-known to James scholars. It highlights the intensity of James’s experience of a situation: if it seems disproportionate to the subjects causing James’s reaction, a few, passive “darkies,” it is not excessive as regards James’s reaction to the sudden awareness that these men were “in possession” of their rights.

James had actually used the same image, *before* using it in *The American Scene*, in one of his best-known stories, “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903),² and he was to use it again in a story published in 1908, strongly related to his re-visiting of New York, “The Jolly Corner.”³ The first is a story that deals with the protagonist’s waiting for some special event which never takes place, his inability to live and love, and with the sudden revelation of such inability. Facing the death of a lifelong friend, a woman, the protagonist John Marcher becomes suddenly aware that he has not lived, that he has “missed the flower of life” – not in quiet tranquillity as Edith Wharton’s respected citizen, Selden, in *The Age of Innocence*, who has given up love for respectability – but with a burst of violence.

The revelation of something not captured, of a life lost without living it, without love, is the sudden assault of the beast on John Marcher, in the story:⁴

The Beast had lurked indeed, and the Beast, at its hour, had *sprung*; it had *sprung* in that twilight of the cold April, when, pale, ill, wasted, but all beautiful, and perhaps even recoverable, she had risen from her chair to stand before him and let him imaginably guess. It had *sprung* as he didn't guess; it had *sprung* as she hopelessly turned from him.

...

He saw the *Jungle* of his life and saw the *lurking Beast*; then, while he looked, perceived it, as by a stir of the air, rise, huge and hideous, for the leap that was to settle him. His eyes darkened – it was close; and, instinctively, turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, face down, on the tomb. (*NT* XVII, 126-127)

I quoted the final passage of the short story to indicate how strong this image is in James's text; the verb "sprung," referring to the beast, is repeated four times. The same semantic area, centering on the beast, is here: the jungle, the lurking, and the springing.

The second story, "The Jolly Corner" (1908), concerns the discovery of "the other," that is, what the protagonist, Spencer Brydon, might have been, had he not spent a lifetime in Europe, choosing art over business. Again it is a sudden revelation, taking place in an empty New York house that characterizes the story at least partly as a ghost story. Wandering in his old house on the "jolly corner," Brydon's search for a "presence" is soon presented in terms of a hunt. Brydon's search is for "this *stalking* creature more subtle, yet *at bay* more formidable, than any *beast in the forest*" (*NT* 456-457). The rooms of the house soon become "*moor and mountain and desert*," where "shelter or shade" of door or embrasure are those of "*rock and tree*." The rear of the house is "*the very jungle of his prey*" (459) and the rooms "*mouths of caverns*" (472). The protagonist himself seems to become "some *monstrous stealthy cat*," glaring with "*large shining yellow eyes*" (458), as if he belonged to the animal world. At the moment when Brydon becomes sure of the other's presence, "again the question *sprung* at him" (474). Finally the appearance of Brydon's horrible "double," with his face covered by his hands, one deprived of two fingers (those of the writer), causes Brydon a shock and a collapse into nothingness, very close to John Marcher's final flinging of himself on the tomb, in "The Beast in the Jungle."

If we look at the violence conveyed by the metaphor of the Beast in both short stories, we can hypothesize that only a similarly strong

impression, in life, must have retrieved this metaphor from James's imagination, in order to express his view of the South and of the race question.

The image of the Beast in the short stories seems to catch the dark power of a repressed personal unconscious which suddenly erupts to the surface and to consciousness; the same image in *The American Scene* seems to make a personal *and* social unconscious emerge into the light: the repressed question of race.

It seems possible, and likely, that the strength of James's sudden awareness of the race question, depended – for its intensity – on the fact that he had been away from the USA for over twenty years, that, in Washington in 1904 he was looking at the USA with 'transatlantic' eyes, eyes used to looking on the more controlled and traditional social scene of England and Europe.

This is in fact true of the whole of *The American Scene*, which is a passionate statement about the changes that James found in his country, and by which he was so forcefully struck – whether these changes regarded the form of New York with its new high-rise buildings and the cancellation of history, the form of Newport where the huge stone mansions of the newly rich rose like "white elephants" near the former modest, wooden, vernacular, buildings; or – much more important – the changes in the social structure of the USA, in particular of a New York taken over by immigrants, and the changes regarding the South.

James declared emphatically how totally aware he was of his 'new' way of looking at the USA after a lifetime spent in Europe, in a long passage:

It was "Europe" that had, in very ancient days, held out to the yearning young American some likelihood of impressions more numerous and various and of a *higher intensity* than those he might gather on the native scene; and it was doubtless in conformity with some such desire that he had originally begun to consult the European oracle. This had led, in the event, to his settling to live for long years in the very precincts, as it were, of the temple; so that the voice of the divinity was finally to become, in his ears, of all sounds the most familiar.

...

The European complexity, working clearer to one's vision, had grown usual and calculable – presenting itself, to the discouragement of wasteful emotions and of "intensity" in general, as the very stuff, the common texture, of the real world. Romance and mystery – in other words the *amusement* of interest – would have therefore at last to provide for themselves elsewhere; and what curiously befell, in time, was that the native, the forsaken scene, now passing, as continual rumour had it, through a thousand stages and changes, and offering a perfect iridescence of fresh aspects, seemed more and more to appeal to the faculty of wonder. (*AS* 366)

A few lines later, James concludes:

Europe had been romantic years before, because she was different from America; wherefore America would now be romantic, because she was different from Europe. (366)

More than a new “wonder,” James found in his changed America, a world that “discomposed” and “admonished” him. He found rather more than he was ready for, as regards immigrants and race, in spite of the “continual rumour” about its changes that had reached him from across the Atlantic.

The passage on the new source of interest in the USA does not open *The American Scene*; it opens Chapter 12, which is the first of the chapters devoted to the South (Chapters 12-14), the last part of the book, that takes the reader deeper and deeper into the South.

In order to focus and perhaps explain the violence of James's reaction and metaphor at the view of a few “darkies” in possession of their rights, it might be useful to see what image of the South, and of the race question, may have been in James's mind both before he left the USA and when he returned.

As late as 1914, two years before James died, the horrors of World War I reminded him of the “other war,” the Civil War (Edel 169), which had been part of his youth and of his family, as two of the younger James brothers, Wilky – who was “severely wounded both in the ankle and in the side” (*Notes* 381) – and Bob, had taken part in it. In James's *Notes of a Son and Brother*, a very late memoir (1914), the writer went back to his childhood, adolescence and youth and reconstructed his own and his family's experience of the Civil War. He used some “faded and touching pages” of Wilky's letters written from the South and Savannah. In James's memory the Civil War was something his brothers had lived in full, in spite of the tragedy. The admiration of the James family for the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts, “Colonel Robert Shaw's regiment, the first body of coloured soldiers raised in the North” (*Notes* 381), with whom Wilky had volunteered, was absolute. James had no doubts about the heroism of the black troops in the 54th: the emotion he felt in 1904, many years after the War, in front of the “recorded names” of those troops in the Boston Public Library and in front of the Saint-Gaudens “noble and exquisite monument to Robert Gould Shaw and the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts” (*AS* 250) on the Boston Common only confirms this admiration.

For a family of New England intellectuals, such as the James family, there could be no doubts about the sanctity of the war and the rights of the blacks. In the *Notes* James also remembers an episode concerning his childhood, regarding the sudden flight of mother and son, the “slaves” of a Kentucky family who had become a neighbour of the Jameses (Warren 19). If the owners were “shocked at such ingratitude” (*Notes* 143), the mother and son who had fled “had never been for us so beautifully slaves as in this achievement of freedom” (142). In spite of the aloofness of the James family from the race question, the family could not but belong to the enlightened New England intelligentsia, as shown by Henry James Sr.’s Independence Day speech of 1861, clearly condemning slavery (Edel 169, Haviland 126).

It is well known that the rights of the African-Americans,⁵ after the abolition of slavery in 1866, the 14th Amendment (1868) and the Civil Rights Acts of 1875, were gradually and constantly eroded and abolished after the end of Reconstruction (1877): in 1883 the “Civil Rights Cases” and in 1892-1896 the Plessy vs. Ferguson case legalized segregation, in spite of the 13th Amendment (1865), which Plessy had advocated to defend his position (Warren 19).

From 1883 to 1904 James was in England: he certainly was informed on what was going on in the USA, were it only for the fact that debates on the race question were published in the same journals where he published his stories, such as *The Century*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Monthly*, *The North American Review* (Warren 20).

But all this was rather far away and it does not seem to have marked deeply James’s consciousness. There does not seem to be any reference to the race question in his published letters,⁶ nor to the Plessy vs. Ferguson case, from 1892, when it started, to 1896 when the Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal facilities were constitutional.

If we read James’s letters and his notebooks, – and of course his essays and creative work – we find that the American theme is always present, as regards manners and morals. But can we say the same of the problem of the South, and of the problem of race?

References to race, as regards language and *mores*, are indeed scattered throughout more than one work by James, from *Roderick Hudson* to *The Portrait of a Lady* to *What Maisie Knew* to *The Ambassadors*, or in such stories as “The Real Thing,” “The Point of View,”⁷ as Warren and other scholars have shown, but they do not seem central to James’s

preoccupations. The most obvious references to the South, and race, in James's work are notoriously to be found in *The Bostonians* (1885-86): Basil Ransom, the main male character, comes from the South. He represents the well-mannered and despairing South, the heroic and wasted south of the post-Civil War period.⁸

If one looks at James's *Notebooks*, it is quite amazing to find that in his sketching out of the "germ" for *The Bostonians*,⁹ there is no single word about Basil Ransom coming from the South: this character seems to have materialized – as a soft spoken southern gentleman – only as a narrative foil¹⁰ to the two New England feminist characters, Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant.

In the *Notebooks*, that most revealing document of James's passions and of his imagination, between 1883 and 1904, again, there is not a word regarding the race question or the South: amazing. Amazing, because while it is true that James was involved in British society, in European manners and art, and had actually turned his back on his country with his choice of living in London, the concern with the USA was constantly present in his creative work, in his letters and *Notebooks*.

One comment on the South can be found in James's review of Constance Fenimore Woolson's stories (1887), where James seems to underline the "picture of dreariness" that Woolson gave of the South, "the *voicelessness* of the conquered and reconstructed South" (*Essays* 1984, 640-641), a description that somewhat matches what one will find in *The American Scene*.

Over the years, the South remained for James the heroic and wasted South of the Civil War; the race question could not be suppressed but it disappeared into the background of James's consciousness.

When he went back to the USA, the race question suddenly "sprang" upon him, with the violence of a beast in the jungle. James was not prepared to really face the question of race, – which does not mean that his, most conservative, position is to be justified – he had been away too long. There seems to be a hiatus in James's conception of the South between 1883 and 1904: the image of the old South is there and remains there, analyzed in James's contact with the land, losing whatever romantic association it may ever have had ("everything differed, somehow, from one's old conceived image," *AS* 413). The new rights of the blacks, the denial of these rights, the violence of a society where lynching was the norm, do not seem to have entered James's consciousness.

In *The American Scene*, the more deeply “the restless analyst” goes into the South, looking for the ‘old South,’ the more he realizes that that old South was a myth, an empty void, provincial, limited, airless, because it was slave country:

How was the sight of Richmond not to be a potent idea; how was the place not, presumably, to be interesting, to a restless analyst who had become conscious of the charge involved in that title as long ago as the outbreak of the Civil War, if not even more promptly; and to whose young imagination the Confederate capital had grown lurid, fuliginous, vividly tragic – especially under the process through which its fate was to close round it and overwhelm it, invest it with one of the great reverberating historic names? They hang together on the dreadful page, the cities of the supreme holocaust, the final massacres, the blood, the flames, the tears; they are chalked with the sinister red mark at sight of which the sensitive nerve of association forever winces. (*AS* 369)

James achieves heights of poetical intensity in this passage, which concerns the Richmond of the Civil War, of his youth. The isolation of the South (Haviland 110-112) seems to reverberate in James’s question on DuBois: “Had the *only* focus of life then been Slavery?” as he writes referring to “the only ‘Southern’ book of any distinction published for many years,” that is, *The Souls of Black Folks*.

The passage on Richmond – and the whole of the chapter on Richmond, which is a dirge for the South – can be seen in striking contrast with other passages that seem to dismiss the South and the blacks as nuisances, as unmannered and rough individuals.

As much as James identifies the empty dream¹¹ of the old South, “the hugest fallacy” of its slave system, “the prison of the Southern spirit” (375), he is not ready for the new South, and he can only see “tatterdemalion darkies” lounging and sunning themselves, or rough black servants, putting his “dressing-bag” “straight down into the mud of the road” (*AS* 423) before he has to place it on his own knees, or roughing him at breakfast. His observation of the blacks in the South is superficial, impatient, when not horrified. “This blight of vulgarity” (*AS* 427) seems to be all over the South.

But James always surprises us: in the midst of his impatient or even racist observations on the blacks, we find an episode that is highly disquieting, that seems to upset all of our conclusions about James’s racism.

The episode concerns James’s visit to the Confederate Museum in Richmond: a museum where the “sorry objects,” with their “low aesthetic level,” show a community “disinherited of art or of letters” (386). In that museum, “The illiteracy seemed to hover like a queer

smell" (386). James meets there a young Virginian, who knows everything about the objects in the Museum and the history of the South. The writer looks at the museum with this young man, who has an "exact knowledge of these old, unhappy, far-off things," he compliments him on this knowledge, and seems to find the young man a very pleasant companion during the visit. At the end of the chapter, the young Virginian is described as "a fine contemporary young American, incapable, so to speak, of hurting a Northern fly – *as* Northern" (388). This young man has a "Platonic passion" for his own world. But after praising this young man for his knowledge and his passion, James concludes the passage as follows:

. . . though he wouldn't have hurt a Northern fly, there were things (ah, we had touched on some of these!) that, all fair, engaging, smiling, as he stood there, *he would have done to a Southern negro.* (389) (my emphasis)

James does not specify, neither can we deduce from the previous passages, what these "things" might be. But one thinks of the violence implicit in the young man's memory of his father's actions during the Civil War, expressed with some coarseness of language: his father's participation "comprised a desperate evasion of capture, or worse, by the lucky *smashing of the skull of a Union soldier*" (my emphasis, 388), which the young man says he would be ready "to do . . . all over again myself!"

The vagueness of the term "things . . . done to a Southern negro" is in itself ominous and it suggests "things" that James certainly knew about: one thinks of the lynchings of the blacks, so forcefully and tragically documented in the photographic exhibition "Without Sanctuary." Lynchings which everybody knew about (Warren 112), often documented in picture-postcards that showed the lynchers smiling in front of the hanged, mutilated, and burnt body of the victim. James certainly knew about the "epidemic of lynching" which was going on at the turn of the century, were it only because William James wrote a letter, "A Strong Note of Warning Regarding the Lynching Epidemic," on that very subject, published in the *Republican*, on July 19, 1903.¹² The intellectual link between the two brothers, in spite of their mutual criticism, documented, among many other facts, by William's sending to Henry the DuBois book, was such that James couldn't possibly have ignored this essay.¹³

In the readers' mind, the fine young Virginian becomes associated in the ominous vagueness of the "things . . . done to a Southern negro"

with someone in a “posse” – with the lynchers of Willy Mayes in Faulkner’s “Dry September” – with the ‘good old boys’ smiling in front of the mutilated and burnt body of some young black, hanging from a tree.

James does not say so, he only suggests the possibility of the “things” the Virginian “would have done to a Southern negro.” His insight into a society he had been absent from for over twenty years might make *us* use his image of the beast in the jungle as an image applicable to the white lynching parties.

The image of the jungle returns once more in *The American Scene*, as regards the natural landscape of Florida: into the *jungle* the visitor is taken in a vehicle drawn by a bicycle pedalled by a “robust negro.” The jungle of Palm Beach offers no danger, just a short dip into a nature that seems characterized by “the succulence of the admirable pale-skinned orange and the huge sun-warmed grape-fruit” (449). The jungle visited with the negro guide offers no real danger, and has lost all metaphorical danger, the “robust negro” being only a servant.

Abbreviations of Works Cited

- AS*: Henry James. *The American Scene*. With an introduction and notes by Leon Edel. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968.
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- Notes*: Henry James. *Notes of a Son and Brother. Autobiography*. Ed. Frederick W. Dupee. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1956.
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Notes

- ¹ For an in-depth discussion of the reactions to ethnic and racial questions in *The American Scene*, see Gert Buelens, *Henry James and the 'Aliens' in Possession of the American Scene* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 1992) 4-17; G. Buelens, "Possessing the American Scene: Race and Vulgarity, Seduction and Judgement," *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power and Ethics*, ed. G. Buelens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 166-192; see also Kenneth W. Warren, *Still Reading Henry James?* 282-285 of the special issue "Race Forum" of the *Henry James Review*, vol. 16.3 (Fall 1995). See also the works by Mark Seltzer, Bill Boelhower, Gert Buelens, Sara Blair, Beverly Haviland, Ross Posnock, and other critics, all listed in my bibliography. The book by Kenneth W. Warren, *Black & White Strangers. Race and American Literary Realism* (1993) is particularly important, especially as regards the "formidable question" I will deal with.
- ² Haviland lists a number of works where the stereotyped image of the negro as beast appears, 123.
- ³ Although James jotted down the idea of a man having achieved a different personality in his *Notebooks* (1895, 1899, 113, 183) before going back to the States, the writing of the story took place after his visit to the changed New York.
- ⁴ This story was interpreted in terms of homosexual panic by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1983; this important essay was then published as Chapter 4 in *Epistemology of the Closet*, in 1990. For a reading of the story as negotiation of power and identity see Buelens 20-25.
- ⁵ Among others, see Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, especially chapter 6.
- ⁶ New interesting elements on this and other issues might come up in the complete edition of James's letters, prepared by University of Nebraska Press. Of James' extant letters, only about a third has been published. James did comment on such famous cases as the Dreyfus affair (1894-97), and the Boer war of 1899.
- ⁷ James had one letter-writer, M. Cockerel, in "The Point of View" (1882), describe Washington as a place of democracy, and in general the USA as the place of the future, where in spite of the "immense deal of plainness" "there's little misery, little squalor, little degradation." Cockerel seems race-blind in his description of the USA. *The Complete Tales*, vol. IV (1962) 515.
- ⁸ James' story "A Most Extraordinary Case" (1868) deals with a young survivor of the Civil War, but it can hardly be defined as a story dealing with the South, as it is set in New York and in the Hudson River Valley.
- ⁹ James jotted down the outline of *The Bostonians* on April 8, 1883, while he was still in Boston. The main idea, underlined more than once, was to prove he could write "an American story": "The whole thing as local, as American, as possible, and as full of Boston: an attempt to show that I can write an American story." (*Notebooks* 19). The answer to a "tale very characteristic of our social conditions" was "the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf" (20). When he tried out titles and named his characters, the reference to Basil was only: "The hero is Basil Ransom" (30), with no indication whatever that he was from the South; previously "the lover" is said to have spent "ten years in the West" (19). On James' exclusion of *The Bostonians* from *The New*

York Edition, and therefore on the lack of a Preface, see Philip Horne, *Henry James and Revision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 12-13.

- ¹⁰ James seems to judge the character of Basil Ransom as not quite as it should be. In writing to John Hay, on May 13 (1885) James wrote: "Basil Ransom is made up of wandering airs & chance impressions, & I fear that as the story goes on he doesn't become solid as he ought to be. He remains a rather vague & artificial creation, & so far as he looks at all real, is only *fait de chic*, as the French say." James then goes on appreciating a Southern senator's and John Hay's praise of the character. Philip Horne, *Henry James. A Life in Letters* 175.
- ¹¹ On the relation between the "defeated project" of the South and the problem to honor the past see William Righter, *American Memory in Henry James* 34-35.
- ¹² This letter was "widely reprinted," for instance in the *Boston Journal* on July 29, 1903; see William James, *Essays, Comments and Reviews* 170-173, followed by an essay "Epidemic of Lynching" (1903) 173-176.
- ¹³ G. Harvey, James' publisher, was the author of *The New Negro Crime*, published in *Harper's Weekly*, in January 1904, on the subject of lynching (Haviland 114).

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