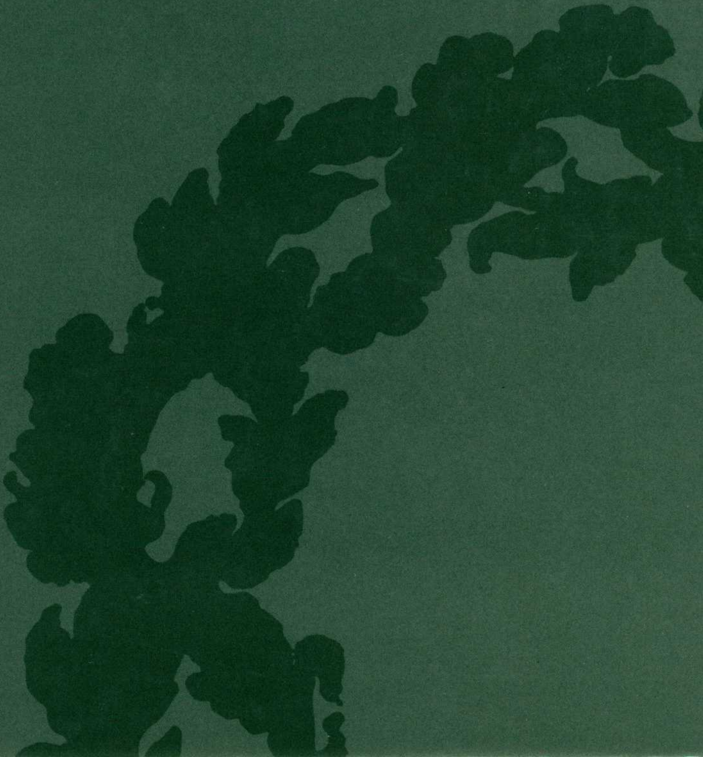
Writing the Self: Henry James and America

Peter Collister



WRITING THE SELF: HENRY JAMES AND AMERICA

BY

Peter Collister

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For John, Mary and Ginger

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AS	Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. Leon Edel (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1968).
Aut	*Henry James: Autobiography: A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
CN	*The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
CT	*The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, 12 vols (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962–4).
HJL	*Henry James: Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974–84), vol. I: 1843–75; vol. II: 1875–83; vol. III: 1883–95; vol. IV: 1895–1916.
IT	Henry James, *The Ivory Tower*, ed. Percy Lubbock (London: Collins, 1917).
JF	F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family: A Group Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1947).
LCA	*Henry James, Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York and Cambridge: Library of America, 1984).
LCF	*Henry James, Literary Criticism: French Writers, other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York and Cambridge: Library of America, 1984).
Life	Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
SP	Henry James, *The Sense of the Past*, ed. Percy Lubbock (London: Collins, 1917).

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1 LETTING YOURSELF *GO*: JAMES ARRIVES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

In *The Sacred Fount*, that novel in which legendarily little happens beyond the convoluted searching for the secrets of a mysterious, suspected relationship during an English country house weekend, a small group of people discuss a painting of an unknown person holding a mask. The portrait itself initiates questions, but the group of observers contains its own mysteries. Those who observe are themselves observed. As part of a changing sequence of pairings and suspected pairings, Mrs Server (whose name suggests subservience or even a truncated form of observing) is restrained by the narrator and they wait 'face to face, looking at each other, as if to catch a strain of music'. Even as they listen in together to a one-sided dialogue in which the silent listener is revealed to be 'a distinguished painter', that moment is subverted by an unfolding social transgression, indeed another cue for narrative possibility, as the narrator comes into eye contact with the listener. The man moves, 'but not so as to interrupt – only so as to show me his face in a recall of what had passed between us the night before in the smoking-room', and each breaks free from his unsuspecting companion in a silent liaison as their eyes catch: 'I allowed myself to commune a little, across the shining space, with those of our fellow-auditor'. The room contains alternative communications and messages beyond the audible. The narrator, on the periphery of that more formal, expository conversation, cannot 'quite follow it', but he knows, because he can read it in the other's expression, that it is gifted talk: 'This was what his eyes indeed most seemed to throw over to me – "What an unexpected demon of a critic!"'[1]

When the narrator and his companion cross to join the others and look at the painting, Mrs Server surprises him by recognizing it, 'showing more remembrance than I had attributed to her': '"Oh yes, – the man with the mask in his hand!"' In the novel's contrived scheme of reciprocal losses and gains whereby people become young-looking or shine with intelligence at the expense of a more aged-looking or duller-growing partner, the narrator perceives that the speaker has now changed and appears 'fairly distinguished', even since the previous evening. In this company of observers who engage in a series of encounters in which they are systematically surprised at the shifting mystery of individuals, it is unsurprising that the painting which draws them together should itself lay down signifiers capable of a variety of readings. Indeed, the narrator begs for Long, the 'demon critic', to repeat some of his points – '"It's the picture, of all pictures, that most needs an interpreter"' (p. 44) – and they must '"know what it means"':

> The figure represented is a young man in black – a quaint, tight black dress, fashioned in years long past; with a pale, lean, livid face and a stare, from eyes without eyebrows, like that of some whitened old-world clown. In his hand he holds an object that strikes the spectator at first simply as some obscure, some ambiguous work of art, but that on a second view becomes a representation of a human face, modelled and coloured, in wax, in enamelled metal, in some substance not human. The object thus appears a complete mask, such as might have been fantastically fitted and worn (pp. 44–5).

Whatever the picture's reference to some didactic Renaissance message, the detail of the pose suggests some courtly figure from the tradition of Commedia dell'Arte depicted by Watteau. The face and the mask invite multiple readings. The picture might be called 'the Mask of Death', but equally, because it is seen as '"blooming and beautiful"', 'the Mask of Life', whilst the living man's face might itself be Death. Though the mask, to one person, has '"an awful grimace"' (p. 45), to others it is '"extremely studied"' and '"charmingly pretty ... I don't see the grimace"'. The 'distinguished painter' in the group sees the mask, with an adjustment of gender, as depicting 'a lovely lady', indeed resembling the narrator's companion, who is '"immensely obliged"' for such an ambiguous compliment. And even the pale gentleman depicted reminds them all tantalizingly of 'some face in our party' (p. 46), a puzzle soon solved which confirms the narrator's own hunch, but it is a likeness not recognized by his female companion. The company regroups, the narrator and the painter begin to talk with 'the others being out of earshot' (p. 47), the narrative realigning itself for the next sequence of observations.

The picture serves as a gathering point for hermeneutic speculation, though it is only one of several occasions when the narrative succumbs to a multiplicity of associated perspectives and judgments. The mix of possibilities seems inexhaustible as different options are introduced. The distinctive readings can be contradictory: is the mask male or female, is it the living face or the facsimile that is condemned or blessed by mortality? In this dramatization of the subjective which refuses to reach conclusion or endorse one authority rather than another, the most remote and inaccessible yet data-rich source of information is the picture – but this seems only to generate questions. Indeed its content dramatizes the simplest operation of human interchange, the public and the private, appearance and truth, and the shifting ground to be negotiated between apparent polarities. Yet the human spectators who are sharing this weekend occupy an equally arcane and symmetrical pattern of being, tied up with questions both trivial and urgent, spying and spied upon in an evolving and artificial set of circumstances, the world of the fiction.

Pictures and the observing of pictures recur, of course, frequently in James's fiction from his earliest days, many of them demanding to be related to the human circumstances of the narrative.[2] However the scene with 'The Man in the Mask' at its centre raises much more complex questions on the nature of subjective experience, on reading the multiple messages of an art object, or the unfolding pattern of changing human relations and their need of interpretation. It signals a moment of ambiguity and contradictoriness, a warning against the straightforward or commonsensical, a reminder of the significance of silence, of meaning contained in indirection. If James represents the painting and its group of human commentators as a drama of the ironies or dangers of interpretive overconfidence, the episode can serve, however loosely, as a cautionary example of the hazards of interpretation. The scene exemplifies the power of impressions, the hesitations and duplicities which can influence the reading of a situation, the values which characterize the representational. They are terms and conditions frequently invoked or enacted by James himself in his twentieth-century writing, and it is, in a much fuller and more diverse context, this construction of experience and the means of its recording that I shall examine in *Writing the Self: Henry James and America*. The emblematic episode above raises, of course, the possibility of dangers and multiplying ramifications, but my argument addresses the last dozen years of the novelist's life in the light of probably the most significant event of that period – his extended return to America, his attempt to assimilate this new world, the destabilizing impact of the adventure, and the revised and liberated self which was to find a characteristic voice in both the autobiographical writing as well as the fiction.

It has been said that the celebrated Prefaces for the twenty-four-volume New York Edition (1907–9) of his works constitute, as well as the most critically sophisticated critique of the novel, a form of autobiography of James's revisionary self.[3] The preparation of the edition occupied him for over two years and, aside from its personal significance, added James to a series of celebrated authors of the time who published *de luxe* editions of their works. Whatever the aesthetic achievement, the public gesture foundered: the edition was largely and humiliatingly ignored. The autobiographical impulse is frequently extrapolated from the discursive allusions and tropes of the Prefaces: in *Writing the Self* I have attempted to locate James's assembling of his American self in the text of *The American Scene*, his complex record of return to his homeland and confrontation with both its known and unfamiliar landscapes. The psycho-emotional experience narrated in that journey was profound, a form of initiation noted,

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even in the years immediately after James's death, as shocking. Percy Lubbock, in his 1920 edition of the novelist's letters, refers to this 'voyage of new discovery' as 'the adventure', 'the daily assault of sensation', the gathering of 'a vast mass of strange material', and (echoing his subject) the exercise of an 'unbroken rage of interest'.[4] For a later generation Leon Edel characterized the late works as belonging to the novelist's '"American years", more American even than the years of his lost youth'.[5]

In a surprising statement in *The American Scene*, the volume which documents his return, James suggests (and he had just witnessed some disturbing scenes of immigration on Ellis Island) that 'one's supreme relation, as one had always put it, was one's relation to one's country' (*AS*, p. 85). There is no doubt that in his reading of nation, mysterious or undecipherable as its messages might be, and destabilized by the aggressive effects of twentieth-century industrialism, James went on to develop a discursive mode which acknowledges, most crucially, the erotic potential of the anonymous, the oblivious crowd, the 'adventure' of the street or chance liaison. The subsequent writing, both fictional and autobiographical, develops the self-revelatory insights and idioms of *The American Scene* (which could also be regarded as a history of The American Self[6]) and assumes a new perspective whereby men become fluent in their reading of each other and narrative stretches the boundaries of gender-defined behaviours. Amongst the works I discuss which are 'intimately related to his American self' (*Life*, vol. II, p. 621) are two of the last great short stories, 'The Jolly Corner' and 'A Round of Visits'; the two complete volumes of autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*; the incomplete novels, *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past*; and, for the light they throw upon the centrality of the Civil War in James's construction of history, some of his earliest published work, the three short stories 'The Story of a Year', 'A Most Extraordinary Case' and 'Poor Richard'.

In the summer of 1910 James accompanied his older brother William home to die – 'a bitter pilgrimage ... from far off' (*HJL*, vol. IV, p. 561), but it was his earlier trip of 1904–5 which exerted the most profound influence on his writing, causing him to reconfigure his relations with the country he had not visited for over twenty years, appraise his sense of family and consider, a little ruefully, his own condition as 'repentant absentee' (*AS*, p. 2). He self-deprecatingly aligns himself with Lambert Strether, the 'poor old hero' of *The Ambassadors*, to whom he acknowledges a 'vague resemblance',[7] but the destabilizing shock caused by America, the psychic and emotional repercussions which ensued, and the assimilation of the experience denote a stamina absent from Strether's conviction of his 'meagreness', that he has 'lived' as much as he can, with little greater sense of identity than that provided by seeing his name discreetly in print on the cover of the Woollett journal he edits and which Mrs Newsome finances.[8] If James begins revising himself in relation to this new-found and shocking continent, it seems too that in the concussive experience of seeing familiar old places, witnessing the disintegration of other identity-confirming sites, and seeing afresh locations associated with the history of the nation in which he had little part, he also 'rights' himself in a process which is definably present in his writing.

'America' signifies more complicated insights, too, as my chapters on *The American Scene* will illustrate. The 1904–5 visit produced a series of essays which, in their portrayal of threatened identity, of the questioning of autobiographical method, of fearful recognition of people and events from a distant past, of self-abandonment to anonymous encounters and pleasurable liaisons, of the silences produced by ethnic distance and difference, of aesthetic conviction that demands that language should not conspire to mask disparities, bear little relation to the genre of travel-writing, even as defined by James's own volumes on France, England and Italy. If James interrogates the issues of nation, transformed over the previous twenty years and reflective of his own psychic and sexual unease, he also raises the technical challenges of 'notation', of accurately interpreting the signs of a continent which seems frighteningly limitless in its possibilities. James's American scene includes the city of his birth, New York, now the site of the nation's most aggressive expression of modernity and dedication to business and everything provisional, a place which reduces him at times to abject and erotically-charged submission. Setting no store by individual privacy, it has destroyed the locations of his childhood and he experiences a comparable sense of mutilation on returning to Boston, the scene of his early manhood. The places of New England, Cambridge on a September night with its 'old distinctively American earth-smell' (*AS*, p. 56), and Newport, its historic, figuratively spinsterish character transformed by the ostentatious grandeur of mansions financed by business profits, clapboard country villages representing a modified Arcadia, are peopled by the memories of 'ghostly' presences. As James moves south through Washington, Richmond, Charleston, as far as Florida, he is confronted by the symbols of national history and its one most decisive event, the Civil War, commemorated in some of his earliest fiction and returned to in his late autobiography.

James returned to America despite the fears of William and of his Cambridge friend Grace Norton that he would find it impossibly vulgar, and for reasons beyond a need to make money from lecturing or writing travel impressions. As early as 1902 he had written nostalgically to his old friend Sara Wister who lived in Philadelphia as he listened to the ticking of the clock bequeathed to him by her mother, also a friend, the actor and writer Fanny Kemble:

> I echo without the least reserve your declaration (from Aiken, S.C.) that I ought to come home again before the 'romance' of Charleston and the like completely departs. My *feeling* is with you absolutely on the subject; all my sensibility vibrates to the truth

> you utter. *Vous prêchez*, in fine, *un converti*: my native land, in my old age, has become, becomes more and more, romantic to me altogether: *this* one, on the other hand has, hugely and ingeniously ceased to be (*HJL*, vol. IV, p. 259).

In an evolution which, he admits, 'takes some explaining', America has now become what Europe had earlier been for the 'yearning young' – his indirect way of referring to himself. As he travels south towards Virginia, he anticipates the initiation once provided by the 'European oracle'; he will be introduced to 'Romance and mystery – in other words the *amusement* of interest' and, perhaps, some revised version of his youth. America has become a world 'amended and enriched', 'reviving curiosity' and stretching a 'limp imagination'. In an anticipation of Nick Carraway's concluding words in *The Great Gatsby* he admits, in observing a 'perfect iridescence of fresh aspects', that it appeals 'more and more ... to the faculty of wonder' (*AS*, pp. 365–6). His enthusiasm is for the unfamiliar, 'the actual bristling ... USA', less for the America of his past, the land of 'our multiplied memories', principally New York and Boston, but for the unknown; he wants to 'see everything' of the 'Middle and Far West and California and the South'. He may have found it 'almost utterly charmless', yet paradoxically he regards the place as 'an extraordinary world, an altogether huge "proposition", as they say there' (*JF*, pp. 310–13). The newly-returned 'palpitating pilgrim' experiences the conviction as a physical actuality, 'like the rifle of a keen sportsman, carried across his shoulder and ready for instant use' (*AS*, p. 366). Like the hero of his unfinished novel *The Ivory Tower*, he will associate America with its abundant food – 'squash-pie and ice cream in heroic proportions' – and boundless landscapes, the 'dear old American, or particularly New England, scenery. It comes back to me as with such a magnificent beckoning looseness' (*JF*, p. 314).

James, a *flâneur* since his earliest, unsupervised days wandering through New York and revelling in the 'riot or revel ... of the visiting mind' – 'just to *be* somewhere' (*Aut*, pp. 16–17), continues to find 'adventure' in the anonymity of the city streets.[9] In an access of excitement, he 'vibrates' and surrenders himself to the moment, as his language emphasizes, suggesting a mood of sexual nonconformity and dissidence. His susceptibility to 'impressions', acknowledged from the beginning of *The American Scene*, takes on erotic potential, a heightened sensitivity, a state of aroused expectation: he returns 'with much of the freshness of eye, outward and inward, which, with the further contribution of a state of desire, is commonly held a precious agent of perception' (*AS*, 'Preface', n.p.). The 'adventures' of the 'rioting mind' can be initiated in the street, in the promiscuous crowd and his assimilation within it. James's language is full of latitude, and within that breadth his own role shifts and adjusts, inviting the range of interpretation illustrated in the mask scene of *The Sacred Fount*. The psychologist Jerome Bruner, in his theorizing of selfhood, has suggested that 'Self-making through self-narrating is restless and endless ... It is a dialectical process, a balancing act.'[10] Quite distinct from its designation as cultural critique, *The American Scene* constructs a figure who emerges within a series of defined moments, just as the characters who people James's specifically autobiographical writing carry no essentialist reference, but stand as 'a product of our telling'.[11] The achieving of 'our personal identities' is accomplished by the use of what Donald E. Polkinghorne calls 'narrative configuration', and thus James's text can be understood as a document in 'a single unfolding and developing story', containing 'not only what one has been', but also anticipating 'what one will be'. Indeed, this notion of the self as something constructed rather than an 'underlying substance to be discovered', derives, as Polkinghorne indicates, from William James, who proposed in *The Principles of Psychology* the categories of the 'material', 'social' and 'spiritual' as constituents of the whole self.[12] *The American Scene* records the continuing accumulation of material in the configuration of self as the most impressionable and painstaking of observers confronts a continent both known and mysterious. It is a landscape of fearsome incompletion and absence of boundary, which holds incomprehensible messages challenging James, as the text records, to find expedients in writing the self, what William James referred to as that 'Resemblance among the parts of a continuum of feelings' which constitutes 'the real and verifiable "personal identity" which we feel'.[13]

The volumes of formal autobiography had their beginnings in a family-centred enterprise, a consequence in part of his second return to America in 1910 when William, his last surviving sibling, died. The plan to write a 'Family Book' based on his brother's letters was lost sight of as James became engrossed in his own childhood. The volume titles, *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, imply a deferential, self-effacing role in relation to his own life-writing, though in practice his complete control over the available documentary material (principally letters) marks a temperament which can never escape the revisionary impulse. Even as a child he is both observer and the observed; in a Hogarthian London street scene where Henry and William are stared at for bearing the 'alien stamp' of their 'plumage' (*Aut*, p. 174), the conviction of not belonging is inescapable. A different enactment of shame occurs when he stumbles across adult tragedy: overhearing the grief of an aunt separated from her dying husband from whom she has herself contracted tuberculosis, he retreats 'scared and hushed' (*Aut*, p. 105) by the experience. In this theatre of separateness, even potential humiliation, where he did so much 'wondering and dawdling and gaping' (*Aut*, p. 17), James traces the earliest events of his life, set in a provincial antebellum New York or in a Europe of Dickensian or Thackerayan vividness, moving forward to a young manhood which coincided with the outbreak of Civil War in 1861.

The enduring embodiment of that event for James is the sunburnt Union soldier, modelled on the young men he had desired and who absorb his attention in some of the earliest short stories. By 1904 he had developed a language and an idiom for the expression of male–male subjectivity, a style which seems to prevaricate coyly between discretion and daring revelation in its consideration of the male and the masculine and of what the relations between men might consist in. James's London years in the 1880s and 1890s doubtless helped reconfigure attitudes and terms. Michel Foucault's contention that this was the era when 'the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology'[14] has now become a familiar landmark of cultural history. Events in late-Victorian London, the Cleveland Street brothel scandal and the Oscar Wilde trials in the last decade of the century, publicized modes of behaviour demonized by the press as a threat to heterodoxy, as well as prompting draconian amendments to the law. But they also defined and elaborated new terms, variably expressive, within the public sphere. At the end of the nineteenth century, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'new institutionalized taxonomic discourses – medical, legal, literary, psychological – centering on homo/heterosexual definition proliferated and crystallized with exceptional rapidity'.[15] James's equivocal (at best) attitude to Wilde, his admiration for the writing of John Addington Symonds, and his friendships with Edmund Gosse, A. C. Benson and Howard Sturgis, amongst others, represent various configurations of homosexual experience within a professional writing milieu in a period when 'codes of sexuality are being induced and/or imposed'.[16] It is a time, therefore, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, in discussing John Marcher in 'The Beast in the Jungle', when James accedes to 'homosexual possibility', 'whether as a *homosexual man* or as a man with a less exclusively defined sexuality that nevertheless admits the possibility of desires for other men'.[17]

A note made as early as July 1891, when James was staying in Ireland and recovering from influenza, records a moment of personal insight and resolution as he reviews and anticipates the continuing features of his 'personal' as well as 'artistic life' (*CN*, p. 58). In its expansiveness and poignant reassuring of the self it foreshadows Strether's advice to little Bilham in *The Ambassadors* to '"live all you can"'; he foresees that he might still 'touch' upon 'many subjects, break out in many places, handle so many of the threads of life':

> The upshot of all such reflections is that I have only to let myself *go*! So I have said to myself all my life – so I said to myself in the far-off days of my fermenting and passionate youth. Yet I have never fully done it. The sense of it – of the need of it – rolls over me at times with commanding force: it seems the formula of my salvation of what remains to me of a future. I am in full possession of accumulated resources – I have only to use them, to insist, to persist, to do something more – to do much

> more – than I *have* done. The way to do it – to affirm one's self *sur la fin* – is to strike as many notes, deep, full and rapid, as one can. All life is – at my age, with all one's artistic soul the record of it – in one's pocket, as it were. Go on, my boy, and strike hard; have a rich and long St. Martin's Summer. Try everything, do everything, render everything – be an artist, be distinguished, to the last (*CN*, pp. 57–8).

In this anticipation of what he sees professionally as his late spell of unexpectedly fine weather (he was only just forty-eight at the time) he will doubtless meet with 'doubts and discouragements', though even these (and he touches on a sensation prevalent in *The American Scene*) will be 'only so many essential vibrations of one's ideal', a bodily registering of facets of the process of creation, a physical trope typical of James's recording of the sensuousness of creation and writing.

Yet ahead of him lay difficulties: in the final twenty-odd years of his life James suffered from debilitating bouts of mental and physical ill-health, a period summarized by a fairly recent biographer, Lyndall Gordon, thus: 'From a depression in 1893 to a breakdown in 1910–12 – from the age of fifty to sixty-nine – James was haunted by incompletion. His last three novels, great as they are, did not quiet his angst. There was the Master of the novel, and there was the other – a man in the making, uncertain who he was in the end to be.'[18] Though some of these terms are loose (most unhelpfully, 'angst'), the general summary is suggestive. Aside from the theatrical disappointments of the 1890s, he had been in close attendance at the death from breast cancer of his sister Alice in March 1892. His friend Constance Fenimore Woolson died suicidally in Venice in 1894. Much later, William's death in 1910 had been felt as 'an absolute mutilation' (*Life*, vol. II, p. 725). These, most briefly, are the chief external causes of sadness in James's personal life. Despite its poor sales (and a continuing failure of his work to gain a wider readership), the New York Edition nevertheless marked, in terms of the texts achieved and the critical and aesthetic rationale disclosed, a form of completion as satisfactory as could be expected in one so addicted to revision. The separation of the familiar but caricatured designation of James as 'Master' from some 'other', incomplete, questing self, though it makes for a certain biographical tension, creates an unreal division. It is James's great strength and a route to the freedoms evident in his twentieth-century writing that he remains open to uncertainty and willing to express vulnerability – characteristics illustrated in the admissions of incompletion in *The American Scene* and projected in the lives of the young men of his latest fiction.[19]

In other respects, if he has 'let himself go' as he had encouraged himself to do, there is strong evidence to suggest that James was little more 'haunted by incompletion' than anyone with a reflective capacity. The late retrospective writing of the autobiographies recounts from early on the detachment of what he would later call 'that queer monster, the artist, an obstinate finality, and inexhaustible sensibility' (*HJL*, vol. IV, p. 706). As F. W. Dupee points out in the introduction to his edition

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