

The Europeans

H. James

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I must have bought the book back in high-school, and possibly even read it back then. If so I remember nothing of it. In fact at that relatively tender age in my English literary education I read quite a few books by Henry James, very little though having stayed with me. Obviously I had at the time neither gained the prerequisite language ability nor the necessary experience of life to fully appreciate his novels, although I might have been offended by such suggestions indicating the vice of snobbishness being in the habit, a habit that incidentally has much to commend itself, of trying to appropriate things which properly speaking were beyond me. However, the experience of James was not a very favourable one, and some years later, I remarked at a Cambridge laundromat to a woman reading James that I found him bloodless, an accusation not entirely out of place when his books are compared to that of the Russians I at the time was devouring¹. Anyway forty years later I might be in the position of fully appreciating the merits of a Henry James, if for no other reasons than to acknowledge him as the brother of William James. My appreciation of the sophisticated language will surely be sharper, but above else, experience of life as an adult, may make me more conducive to lend a sympathetic ear. Maybe the time has come for a kind of revival, letting those yellowing Penguin editions, which I have dutifully moved back and forth in all the intervening years, come back to life again, after having been abandoned into a state of muteness. What better choice than to start with this slim volume.

James starts in media-res. We are presented by a scene out of context, and only gradually do the factual aspects emerge, such as the names of their characters, their situations in life, and their purposes. It takes about a few pages to slowly establish that two siblings a brother and a sister, brought up in Europe, of partly American heritage, are travelling to Boston to elicit the support of kinsmen, of whom they have never had any previous contact, in order to improve their fortunes. The younger brother is depicted as a happy artist, of no real renown, but with an optimistic bent, while his four years older sister, no longer in the first blossom of her youth, is notwithstanding her elevation as a baroness and relation to a German prince, in a socially ambiguous situation. In fact the social situation for the two of them is very ambiguous, and will they have enough aplomb to carry it off? Therein clearly lies the tension of the plot, and the reader who at this point harbours no curiosity, better quite right now and then, because the novel will provide no rewards which do not bear directly upon this issue.

James does carefully describe the appearances of the two people, yet although done in a vivid manner, the descriptions do not stick, and play almost no role in what will unfold. The overly systematic description of personal physiognomies belong to one of the most obvious pitfalls into which any writer of fiction might eagerly fall, and one to

¹ At that encounter I was reading 'Dead Souls'.

which few writers seem immune. The point is to suggest, not to impose, the reader always making up the visual aspects of a story, a creative work for which there is no substitute in novel. In film though, it is of course different, then the visual articulation is unavoidable, but is as such no longer part of the narrative proper. What possibly remains of those lengthy descriptions of the two relatives is that the baroness is not pretty, but that she carries herself as if she was, and that the contours of her figures are generous and pleasing, suggesting that her female charms may be so more profound, not being mediated by any conventional prettiness. In fact in literature (as well as in real life?), prettiness is most often associated with insipid sexuality, so also in this short novel, where the only explicitly pretty woman is presented with no inner life at all, and merely serves to provide the errant adolescent of the story, with a conventional matrimonial fall-back, having backed away from the more threatening advances of the more mature baroness.

The novel could have been a play, in fact the plot is entirely carried on by conversation. True there is a rather unobtrusive narrator, who occasionally acts as a crutch to let us have a glimpse into the inner lives, but surely such insights could have been conveyed more obliquely. In fact turning the novel into a play would probably have improved it, as what takes place outside some clearly delineated interior settings are so inconsequential as to being easily adapted if not scrapped altogether. The conversation is at times quite sharp and enjoyable, and would probably have improved by being even more focused by the format of a play. Yet, one should be careful, James wrote a few plays, all of which, I am told, proved to be miserable failures. Parsed down to a play it would never compete with the plays of Chechov, with which it nevertheless has many affinities as to setting and mood. Thus one is forced to admit that the novels of James (or at least this novel) have qualities beyond that of dialogue and conversation, without which they would flounder. In what do those qualities actually consist?

It is definitely not in visual evocation. In fact one gets a very poor sense of place and time. Obviously it sets out in a dreary hotel in Boston, but the view through the window evokes very little of the city, and the reference to omnibuses packed with people, rather confuses the imagination than instructing it. The residence of the relatives is obviously of a rural nature, or at least suburban, although one should be careful using such a word anachronistically. This of course makes one think of Chechov. But the one attempt James makes of bringing to the fore the New England landscape fails miserably. We are set in an immense wood, asked to admire a view together with the Baroness, but it just fails to materialize. Why? Simply there are no concrete details to jog the imagination of the reader. Once again a visual description should never be systematic, it should be suggestive, just as the world of scents, but James lacks such a receptive olfactory organ. Clearly nature does not interest James, and this is a great draw-back, maybe on a more exalted level, a minor personal tragedy, or at least a major personal defect. To James American Society must just have been a pale imitation of European, no wonder why he early on became an expatriate. To really understand America one must get a sense of its vast and mostly unpopulated nature and the unlimited horizons with which such uncultivated vastness is associated. The allure of America is actually its lack of civilization. Such lack of civilization makes for optimism, and this kind of joyful optimism lies at the core of the American experience (or lack thereof?) . True for the past fifty years or so, this optimism has been vulgarized, and

I am afraid that nowadays much is not left of the original allure. Nature in the States is somehow divorced from civilization and culture, there seems to be no mythology to connect society to its physical environment. Such a mythology disappeared with the dissolution of the native tenure of the land, but while such a rift originally endowed nature with grandeur and opportunity, once nature became tamed (by Interstates and commercial air-routes), those endowments turned irrelevant. True James makes some valliant efforts to present nature obliquely. He talks about the brilliant blue of the sky, and how the crimson of sunsets temporarily grace the interior walls. But after all, one of the main characters, the brother Felix of the Baroness, is an artist. This choice of role should have provided him with an opportunity of at least vicariously presenting the visual splendours of nature. But Felix is no great artist, what he freely acknowledges, he is just a hack, with enough skill to provide on demand, flattering likenesses, liable to be translated in finacial terms.

No, the real forte of James, and which provides that glue, which makes elevates his plays into enjoyable novels, is the knack of literary metaphor. It this that gives to the narrative flow its structure and excitement. The literary metaphor has no place in a play, set in the mouth of a character, it would only be reduced to curiosity. Some of the metaphors employed by James bring to mind those of Proust, who conceivably may have learned some from the older master, but developing them from occasional nuggets into supporting structures of continous delights, the effect of which is not unlike the sustained contemplation of waves incessantly beating upon the shore. What I have in mind is in particular James noting that the artist Felix, thrown into the company of his young female relatives, were for the first time able to enjoy women, without they being framed pictures under glass, and thus that those women looked good in all possible lights, and were saved the interfering reflections of all kinds of extraneous aspects. Or when the father, the stiff and reighteous Mr Wentworth, is thrown into a quandaray whenever he is expected to pronounce judgement on something. In fact the old man feels as if he is in possession of a large collecton of keys, having no clue as to which will fit the particular loock he is asked to open, being jealous of Felix, who seems always to pick the right key by instinct, as would he be a thief intruding effortlessly into private homes.

The point of the novel is, as noted above, to investigate a delicate social situation. The two emigres from Europe are in fact beggars, and to hide that situation from mutual embarrassment, they have to bring all their resources of charm to make it look as if they are doing their (hopefully) rich relatives a favour by gracing them with their sophisticated European presence. A sophistication, as all social sophistication, imbued with the slightly scandalous. We are to understand that their New England relatives are very proper, very moral at least as to frugality, with no ambitions to show off ostentatious wealth, yet making the presence of wealth almost papable as a kind of high moral principle. While the Europeans are thrown out in the world, reduced to live on their wits alone, their rich relatives are solid with no need to worry about survival. Yet, what strikes the ever sanguine artist Felix, is the inability of his relatives to enjoy themselves, taking their solidity just too seriously.

Now a good novel must show depth of character. There is a ready-made criticism of inferior fiction. The problem is that few novels, even among the best, succeed in creating characters of depth, i.e. in the standard parlance, three-dimensional fugures as opposed to

mere flat two-dimensional cut-outs . The young man, Mr Brand, of an ecclestial profession, is a case in point. If ever a 19-th century stock character, whose high morality is rendered irrelevant in view of an undeveloped imagination. So there is no challenge for Felix to win the heart of Mr Brands object of adoration, especially as the latter always have found his demands on her oppressive, however commendable a character he may be in the eys of her well-meaning relatives. So in a rather modest attempt at transcending her conventional upbringing she predictable falls for the charms of Felix, the fresh wind from abroad. And Felix, the ever sanguine artist, are his intentions honorable, i.e. spontaneous and expressive of true sentiment, or just cynical. By character he is an impulsive fellow, used to follow his fancy, and thus by definition anything he does should be classified as spontaneous. Yet spontaneity cannot be a way of life, if so there is a overwhelming danger that it reduces to becoming an instrument of the same. Clearly the young woman Gertrude is in love with him, but is he in love with her? His constant bad conscience that he may be abusing the hospitality of their host seem to indicate that she is in his view nothing but a dalliance of which he may soon get tired. Nevertheless in what is meant as a dramtic climax of the novel, but which I fear will leave most modern readers cold, an appeal to the old man for the hand of his youngest daughter, is made to come to a conclusion by the heroic offer of Mr Brand to marry the two. He Mr Brand is of course to be recompensated by the prospects provided by the older sister Charlotte. As with all high-minded and ostensibly unselfish love, it is too abstract to be really attached to a definite object, but can be easily redirected, once blind obsession has been irretrievably frustrated. And in fact, when Felix previously in one of those improbable interviews, on which the developement of the plot depends, suggests that Charlotte is in love with him, and not Gertrude, he cannot but feel his vanity gratified, making possible his later resolution.

But clearly the most intriguing character is the baroness herself. Unlike her younger brother, she cannot sustain herself on an inexhaustible font of good mood and lively manners. While for Felix being charming has the natural attractions of a vice, to her it is more of a chore, not to say a profession, overlaying a rock foundation of ennui, She manages, partly out of design, partly out of distraction enage the interest of the only worldly character of the small circle in which she has temporarily abandoned herself, a certain Mr Acton, also relative, but one is clearly to understand on the other side of the gracious host family. Mr Acton has been to China and thus seen the world, or at least parts of it beyond the narrow fringes of his circumstances. His curiosity and interest grows into fascination, which turns into an obsession, he is more than willing to interpret as love, of which he clearly has no previous experience. (In fact at an earlier stage he reflects that if this is love, it certainly is being overrated. But it only needs a forced absence in Newport, where the beautiful and charming women fail to obliterate the image of the Baroness, to convince him that this is the real thing.). To accept his proposal would clearl serve her ambitions, on the other hand she cannot hide the fact to herself (or her brother) that she does not care for him in the least. Obviously such sentimental compuncions would carry very little weight, yet she allows the whole thing to peter out, as a nocturnal incidence upon the return of Mr Acton, hampers temporarily his initiative. And what incidence? Here we may come to th emost intriguing aspect of the whole story, only suggested by James, but not spelt out. Clearly there is a burgeoing relation between the Baroness and

her young cousin, a mere boy. A relation that cannot be seen in any other light than a maternal and incestuous one; and although not necessarily physically consummated, of no ambiguous character. As noted above, the young boy shies away from the invitations he is probably too timid and unimaginative to fully embrace, seeking escape in a conventional marriage with his pretty cousin (incidentally in this frugal cast of characters also doubling as a sister to Mr Acton himself). The fiction of Henry James is supposed to contain under its glossy veneer of convention ironically presented, dark secrets, only obliquely hinted at. Their obliqueness may be a sign of literary sophistication, but also a sign that James after all fails as a real profound artist. Clearly he felt and was tormented by emotions to which he only dares to hint in his fiction. His failure to fully express what really bothered him is his most serious artistic failure. On the other hand failure is often proportional to the ambition, by limiting the ambition you also concomitantly limit the failure. Henry James is taken seriously and treated with due respect. No one laughs at him, as they might have, had he fully tried to express himself. Like most cautious artists he chooses to write pastiches. And *The Europeans* is an excellent pastiche of a novel of Jane Austen.

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