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HENRY JAMES: ART AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Georges Poulet is correct in stating that the memory for Henry James is an "inexhaustible reservoir".¹ James was aware of the likelihood of his being overwhelmed, on occasion, with a flood of images from the past, and this realization is nowhere more fully stated than in his autobiographical writings, to which Poulet frequently refers.

The same source reveals another problem that the memory poses for James, however, a pitfall with which Poulet does not deal. This second difficulty lies, not in the overproductivity of the memory, but rather in its underproductivity. For James, the memory either overwhelms one with an uncontrollable flood of recollections, or it falls short of the mark when one requires a particular aspect or small detail of some past occurrence.

It will be seen that James solves this double problem with a single solution: he brings the controls of art to bear on the unwieldy realities of life. By doing so, he necessarily imparts to art a peculiar reality of its own, and one of the intents of this essay is to signify the implications of this procedure, both in the autobiographical volumes and in James's writing generally.

The most striking feature of Henry James's three-volume autobiography—*A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brothers*, and the unfinished *Middle Years*—is doubtless the author's concern with memory. Memory, for James, is a nebulous entity which nonetheless has a substance that must be in some fashion controlled if it is to be appreciated. It is like a gas which has no independent shape or volume and therefore must be contained if it is to be studied and its relevance ascertained. James undoubtedly would have agreed with William Blake's pronouncement: "Truth has bounds, Error none".²

In each case, it is less the detail of a specific person, place or thing that is recalled than the essence of it. Thus of the Clarendon Hotel, which James visited in his early years, it is said: "I recover the place itself as a featureless

void".³ Obviously, a book consisting of a loosely-linked series of "featureless voids" would be of small interest. A corrective is needed here to supply the features and establish limits for the void; to bring the memory, in other words, into the scope of the reader's comprehension. The natural recourse is to art, and therefore the reader is exposed, not simply to the raw materials of the memory, but to memory modified and supplemented by certain technical procedures which will be considered in some detail below.

Realizing that this process might leave him open to accusations of a kind of dishonesty, James disarmingly admits that the reader may well charge him with "treating an inch of canvas to an acre of embroidery". And he attempts at least partially to justify his method by asking that "the poor canvas figure time and the embroidery figure consciousness—the proportion will perhaps then not strike us as so wrong" (521).

This candid admission of deliberate manipulation of real persons, places, and things is repeated elsewhere. Thus of his childhood friend Napier, James boldly states: "He vanishes, and I dare say I but make him over, as I make everything" (227). In the face of such making over, as might be expected, the validity of what is real often seems to be diminished by the manipulation, and specific details become less important. So of the person who shepherded young James and his friends about the sidewalks of Paris it is remarked: "If she wasn't Honorine she was Clementine or Augustine—which is a trifle" (215). And concerning a visit to Schenectady, James recalls: "Wondrous to our sensibility may well have been the October glamour—if October it was, and if it was not it ought to have been!" (303).

The purpose behind this unabashed recasting of actual memories into slightly different shapes is obvious: it is to give specificity and form to what would otherwise be "featureless voids". It is neither more nor less than what any writer of autobiography does; what makes James unique in this respect is his candid willingness to discuss how he "makes over" reality.

It should be noted that, even in referring to a faculty of the mind as intangible and elusive as memory, James does not let his prose wander off into the abstract but insists on particularizing and concretizing the concept with a series of unique images. He speaks of the "ragbag of memory" hung on its nail in his closet (41), and of the "sponge of memory" from which, when squeezed, the "stored secretions flow" (37). And of his first memories of George Eliot the mature James says: "We simply sit with our enjoyed gain, our residual rounded possession in our lap; a safe old treasure, which has ceased to shrink, if indeed also perhaps greatly to swell" (574).

Thus does James give substance to what might otherwise be a succession of very insubstantial references. And, as noted above, by imposing the limitations of metaphor he also reduces the likelihood of overstatement. James's effusiveness is a problem that he himself recognized: "I find bribes to recognition and recovery quite mercilessly multiply, and with the effort to brush past them more and more difficult" (533).

James refers to the double difficulty that the unreliable memory presents when he notes that "I have lost nothing of what I saw . . . though I can't now quite divide the total into separate occasions the various items surprisingly swarm for me" (60). A second remark restates the dual nature of the problem of memory: "Traps for remembrance I find set at every turn here, so that I have either to dodge them or patiently to suffer catching" (322). The single solution to this twofold problem is James's technique of superimposing, by his art, a concrete form on his vague (though numerous) recollections. In the second part of this essay, the various means by which James achieves this effect will be examined.

II

One aspect of James which may account for a number of differences between his writings and those of other authors is the degree to which he integrated life and art and made of the latter a reality, as noted by Robert Spiller in his treatment of James in *The Cycle of American Literature*: "Whereas Poe and Hawthorne had understood the dilemma of the artist as a forced choice between the world of the imagination and the world of fact and had chosen the former, Henry James made art a fact".⁴ That is, the world of the artist is never that of pure romance and moonbeams for James: rather it is one with his "real life", and the artists in James who try to separate life and art (e.g., Roderick Hudson) are never successful.

The factual nature of art was valid for James even during his childhood: concerning the appearances of Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot in the various periodicals of the day, he relates that they "had in the first place simply a genial weight and force, a direct importance, and in the second a command of the permeable air and the collective sensibility, with which nothing since has begun to deserve comparison" (251). So real is art in the mind of James that it often substitutes *for* life, particularly when it serves as a solidifying and concretizing agent to counteract the two prime defects of memory noted above. Thus it is in James that persons, places, and things are often remembered in terms of the books he has read and the plays and *objets d'art* he has viewed which he hap-

pens to recall more accurately at the time of writing than he does the actual past.

A given memory may take its form from painting, as in the case of James's music teacher, old Mr. Charriau, whom James evokes "as resembling, with a difference or two, the portraits of the aged Voltaire" (135). Similarly, the memory of a London street-scene is informed by James's recollection of an illustration from Dickens: "It was a soft June evening, with a lingering light and swarming crowds, as they then seemed to me, of figures reminding me of George Cruikshank's Artful Dodger and his Bill Sikes and his Nancy" (175). One is reminded of Lambert Strether's viewing the French countryside in terms of the Lambinet he had seen years before in Boston.

More often, however, a memory takes its form from a reference to fiction. Thus the portraitist Mr. Crowe is remembered as a "Thackerayan figure" (53), and Mr. Larembert the tutor as "some hero of Victor Cherbuliez" (185). An impression of Paris "comes back to me quite in the form of a chapter from the Rougon-Macquart" (188). The Institution Fezandie, one of his schools, is "describable at best in some of the finer turns and touches of Daudet's best method" (205), is "untouched by the strenuous note, for instance, of Hawthorne's cooperative Blithedale" (206). Another illustration of this aspect of James's technique is the reference to his cousin Robert Temple, who remains to James "as a character, to my attention, in the sense in which 'people in books' were characters . . . so that I fairly thought of him (though this more, doubtless, with the lapse of time) very much as if we had owed him to Thackeray or Dickens" (524).

The reason for this reliance on fiction as a vehicle for memory is made explicit elsewhere as James comments on the Rue d'Angoulême in Paris where his family lived for a brief period: ". . . life and manners were more pointedly and harmoniously expressed, under our noses there, than we had perhaps found them anywhere save in the most salient passages of 'stories'" (190). If a fiction writer's goal is the pointed and harmonious expression of life and manners, as James's certainly is, then something of the same kind of motivation may be expected to attend to his autobiographical writings. And in the pursuit of such a praiseworthy end, it is perhaps understandable that the writer might not hesitate to employ the salient features of the works of other authors in order to achieve the effect of life in his own history.

III

One section in particular of James's autobiography may be examined as an extensive use on his part of the memories of art to give substance to the

less substantial memories of life. I refer to chapters nine, ten, and eleven of the volume entitled *A Small Boy and Others*. This group of chapters deals largely with James's remembrances of his Albany cousins, the Wyckoffs. The first few pages of chapter nine are concerned, however, with James's early memories of the theatre; several pages are then specifically devoted to the "arrangements of Dickens for the stage" (65). Finally, James comes to the cousins. His total impression first takes the form of a "rich and rounded picture" (75). Then James reconstitutes the Albany household in terms of the stage.

Everything was right, truly, for these felicities—to speak of them only as dramatic or pictorial values; since if we were present all the while at more of a drama than we knew, so at least, to my vague divination, the scene and the figures were there, not excluding the chorus, and I must have had the instinct of their being as right as possible. I see the actors move again through the high, rather bedimmed rooms—it is always a matter of winter twilight, firelight, lamp-light; each one appointed to his or her part and perfect for the picture, which gave a sense of fulness without ever being crowded (73).

The superimposition of the dramatic form on actual life provides a unity and wholeness that gives the memory a permanent quality, a perfection suggested repeatedly by the language of the reference; "everything was right", "as right as possible", "each one appointed to his or her part and perfect for the picture", "a sense of fulness without ever being crowded".

The next few pages of chapter nine mark a reversion to a fairly straightforward (for James) commentary on the relatives, particularly Great-aunt Wyckoff, that "image of living antiquity" (73). Soon, however, James returns to the metaphor of the stage and develops it to a much more complex degree than in the previous passage.

These are glimmering ghosts, though that drama of the scene hard by at which I have glanced gives me back its agents with a finer intensity. For the long action set in, as I have hinted, with the death of Aunt Wyckoff, and, if rather taking its time to develop, maintained to the end, which was in its full finality but a few years since, the finest consistency and unity; with cousin Helen, in rich prominence, for the heroine; with the pale adventurous Albert for the hero or young protagonist, a little indeed in the sense of a small New York Orestes ridden by Furies; with a pair of confidants in the form first of the heroine's highly respectable but quite negligible husband and, second, of her close friend and quasi-sister our own admirable Aunt; with Alexander's younger brother above all, the odd, the eccentric, the attaching Henry, for the stake, as it were, of the game. So for the spectator did the figures distribute themselves; the three prin-

cipals, on the large stage—it became a field of such spreading interests—well in front, and the accessory pair, all sympathy and zeal, prompt comment and rich resonance, hovering in the background, responsive to any call and on the spot at a sign (77).⁵

The same sense of everything being “as right as possible” that characterized the first long analogy that James draws between the interactions of his relatives and a stage play is echoed here; again, life takes on an ideal and permanent quality when it is made over as art. Of particular importance is the initial sentence of this passage; it is obviously necessary for James to view these memories in terms of the drama before its “agents” return with a “finer intensity”.

In the paragraphs that follow the passage noted above, some treatment is given to each of the three principals (Helen, Albert, and Henry). Then the earlier reference to Dickens is picked up again and used as a device to characterize and particularize Cousins Henry and Helen. “After I had read David Copperfield an analogy glimmered—it struck me even in the early time: cousin Henry was more or less another Mr. Dick, just as cousin Helen was in her relation to him more or less another Miss Trotwood” (84). James’s tendency to place art on a footing equal with (if not superior to) life has already been observed; with respect to this tendency, it is significant that, in the pages immediately succeeding the above quotation, James refers to Helen repeatedly and exclusively as Miss Trotwood. It is only in the last few pages of the chapter that he seems to recall her actual name.

The substitution of Miss Trotwood for Helen is a good example of the way in which James provides the reader with a kind of objective correlative; few readers know Helen, but most of them know Miss Trotwood. Thus, the substitution of one for the other solves the dual problem of memory: one, it specifies and delimits the character of Helen; and two, it supplies the reader with the details that he needs in order to properly envision her. To put it another way: by substituting Miss Trotwood for Helen, James avoids the temptation to develop her character out of proportion to its importance; and, in addition, he is able to give her the specific traits which his hazy memory would not supply otherwise.⁶

The drama of the cousins reaches its culmination in the final pages of chapter eleven, in which James allows the reader to speculate whether or not the “dimly inspired” Henry Wyckoff will make provision in his will for the “single gentlewomen, to a remarkable number, whom [Helen] regarded and

treated as nieces, though they were only daughters of cousins" (86). These nieces have no property of their own and, by law, Miss Trotwood can leave her estate to no one but Cousin Henry and the pale adventurous Albert; and since the latter might be counted upon to devote his portion of the estate to wantonness, the salvation of the gentlewomen lies entirely in the hands of Cousin Henry. "Here was suspense indeed for a last 'curtain' but one; and my fancy glows, all expertly, for the disclosure of the final scene, than which nothing could well have been happier, on all the premises, save for a single flaw". In life, as in art, the ending is often, except for an occasional "flaw", a happy one, and Cousin Henry finally "made use of the pen" (88) to the enrichment of the deserving gentlewomen. "It was very extraordinary, and of all the stories I know is I think the most beautiful—so far at least as *he* was concerned! The flaw I have mentioned, the one break in the final harmony, was the death of our admirable aunt too soon, shortly before his own and while, taken with illness at the same time, he lay there deprived of her attention" (89).

The use of picture, story, and drama, the references to Dickens in particular—these devices serve to control what might otherwise be an extremely unmanageable and nebulous sequence of memories. It is to James's credit that he admits the flaw in the dramatic structure, matching the flaw in the real life story. In bringing the products of the imagination to bear on what strikes him as inharmonious in the external world, James maintains an equilibrium between the two which guarantees that the truth, flawed though it may be, will emerge.

It is important to note that James always uses art to reinforce reality, never to falsify or distort it. There are characters in James, such as Gilbert Osmond of *The Portrait of A Lady*, who wrongly elevate art over life, who feel more for the bibelots they collect than for other human beings. Both Osmond and James feel strongly about art, and even James suggests from time to time that art is superior, in many ways, to life. The difference between them is that Osmond separates life from art and thereby makes art lifeless, whereas James believes that art and life partake of the same reality and are therefore complementary in nature.

IV

At this point, it would be profitable to note the ways in which the techniques discussed thus far are employed in James's fiction; however, the present essay is limited to the *Autobiography*, and besides, other writers have already treated the topic. Austin Warren, for instance, notes that James's characters often "become . . . works of art" and then lists a number of examples.⁷

And another student of James has noted, in at least a general sort of way, the same kind of conscientious attempt at developing an aesthetic that has been examined in this essay. Following his discussion of James's "real, though intensified world", Wayne Booth remarks that "most writers who have tried to make their *subjects* real have sooner or later found themselves, like James or Sartre, also seeking a realistic *structure* or shape of events, and wrestling with the question of how to make that shape seem a probable reflection of the shape into which life itself falls".⁸ In the particular instance of the autobiographical writings, James often attempts to make his objects real by the superimposition of art upon—or even the substitution of art for—memories of actual persons, places, and things. This is not to diminish the importance of those entities, however, for it may be said of James as James himself said of the French critic Sainte-Beuve: "He valued life and literature equally for the light they threw upon each other; to his mind one implied the other; he was unable to conceive them apart".⁹

NOTES

1. Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 350.
2. William Blake, *The Book of Los*, quoted in George M. Harper, *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 103.
3. *Henry James; Autobiography*, ed. F. W. Dupee (New York: Criterion Books, 1956), p. 53. All quotes are from this one-volume collection of the three books mentioned above; hereafter, only page numbers will be cited after each quote.
4. Robert Spiller, *The Cycle of American Literature* (New York: The New American Library, 1955), pp. 132-33.
5. For an elucidation of the various relationships referred to in this passage, see Dupee's note on page 605.
6. It may be that the idea for the Dickens analogy is not original with Henry James; a version of it appears in two letters by William James quoted in *Notes of a Son and Brother*. See pages 266 ("I have just got home from dining with the boys and their Humperts; where I found the Doctor as genial as ever and the two old ladies perfect characters for Dickens") and 321 ("this Sweetser family is worthy of Dickens").
7. Austin Warren, *Rage for Order* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 56.
8. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 56.
9. *French Poets and Novelists* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1864), p. 320.