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"The treacherous years": Reading *The American Scene* in the Twenty-First Century

Abstract
The present paper tries to argue that facing the challenges and promises of the twenty-first century today is, in fact, connected to the painful realization that we did not read the signs of the tragedies we have had to endure for the first two decades of the new century in our own past. In other words, it poses once again the question of how we come to terms with the past, with our own memories of what we wanted to be, and what we have become. And, as Dante chose a poet as a guide through Hell, I have chosen Henry James in this journey of Hell, not Heaven.

Keywords: Henry James, *The American Scene*, the Promised Land, immigration

At the end of the twentieth century, Kenneth Warren put as a title to an article published in *Henry James's Review* the question: "Still reading Henry James?" (1995: 282–285) while Jonathan Freedman in his "Introduction" to the *Cambridge Companion to Henry James* observed that in comparison to Henry James and his works:

> Few writers would seem *less* likely to survive than one thoroughly embedded in the highest of high literary culture … and few bodies of work would seem less likely to thrive in our MTV-mediated age of instantaneous apprehension. (Freedman 2000: 1)

On the other hand, every Jamesian scholar seems to believe in Robert Louis Stevenson's prediction that in Heaven there will be nothing but harp's songs and reading Henry James. So, if we try to step out of our enchantment with Henry James, what then could be his place in the twenty-first century?

First of all, as I have already observed in a conference paper delivered at the annual BASA conference in 2003, to talk about the twenty-first century seems rather premature and naïve, a romanticizing, or complaining about a future that seems even more "treacherous" than the past that Henry James wrote about on the eve of the First World War. In a letter to one of his many friends, he wrote:

> The plunge of a civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness … is a thing that so gives away the whole age during which we have supposed to be, with

> whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for any words. (in Swan 1952: 40)

These words seem to apply perfectly to the American context of today. The 1990s, with their dominant philosophy of multiculturalism promoted at the citadel of Americanization, the school, were seen as a tremendous leap towards a more tolerant society and a more unbiased view of the Other. In 1991, for example, a state law was passed in Florida declaring that students need to appreciate other cultures and "eliminate personal and national ethnocentrism so that they understand that a specific culture is not intrinsically superior or inferior to another" (in Glazer 1998: 2). The aftermath of September 11, 2001, including the present, however, has offered examples of an entirely different attitude, a "giving away" of the whole age of betterment of social relations in the USA.

In this sense, I think that Henry James's autobiographical writings could be a reading well suited to the dilemmas of the twenty-first century. The scope and aim of the present paper do not allow going into the whole voluminous work from the last, very much autobiographical, stage of his career. The three volumes of his memoirs, *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), and the unfinished *The Middle Years* (1917), 600 pages altogether in Frederick W. Dupee's edition, along with *The American Scene* (1907) and the Prefaces to the New York edition of his collected works, comprise a body of work, which requires a much larger presentation if an exhaustive presentation is sought. However, I will focus on a few excerpts from *The American Scene* that, in my opinion, when re-embedded in our current environment, take on new and often surprising meanings.

I have based my understanding on such views as those articulated by Albert E. Stone, who in his ground-breaking article "Modern American Autobiography" says:

> Whether intended or taken as imaginative creation or historical reconstruction, an autobiography is part and parcel of cultural history. At publication, it is embedded in one situation; then each reader re-embeds the story in her or his own private and social context. Whether as bestseller or unnoticed work, the autobiography then begins its unique history. Culturally important American life-stories have often become re-embedded in later moments and different sets of circumstances, with new or renewed meanings. (1991: 101)

In the aftermath of 9/11 and in the last two decades of American history, the American imagination seems to have been haunted by the question of who the aliens are who should not be allowed to live in the US. The intensified security protocols at airports, the astonishing accounts of individuals undergoing prolonged scrutiny, the influx of undocumented immigrants facing deportation, and President Trump's inaugural executive order of his second term, *Executive Order 14156: Protecting*

the Meaning and Value of American Citizenship, which prohibits individuals born to illegal or temporary immigrants in the USA from obtaining citizenship—contravening a fundamental principle of American democracy, the Fourteenth Amendment—indicate persistent efforts over the past two decades to identify the enemy within.

In an article from June 25, 2003, in the *New York Times*, titled "**Immigrants Feel the Pinch of Post-9/11 Laws,"** Rachel L. Swarns says:

> A new state law, one of many intended to increase security since Sept. 11, 2001, is squeezing legal and illegal immigrants alike – and not only those from Arab and Muslim nations viewed as potential sources of terrorists … Advocates for immigrants sharply criticize the new measures, saying they penalize people who have nothing to do with terrorism.

The immigrants appear to be standing in front of the identical door described by Henry James in *The American Scene*:

> [It] opens to them there only with a hundred forms and ceremonies, grindings and grumblings of the key, [as] they stand appealing and waiting, marshalled, herded, divided, subdivided, sorted, sifted, searched, fumigated, for longer or shorter periods. (66)

What is striking is not so much the parallel that can be drawn between the situation in 1904 and 2003, but the kind of reaction this "has to provoke" in the "sensitive citizen" in Henry James's sense:

> I think indeed that the simplest account of the action of Ellis Island on the spirit of any sensitive citizen who may have happened to "look in" is that he comes back from his visit not at all the same person that he went. He has eaten from the tree of knowledge, and the taste will be forever in his mouth ... So is stamped, for detection, the questionably privileged person who has had an apparition, seen a ghost in his supposedly safe old house. (66)

The tree of knowledge metaphor, although trite, suggests a number of associations: America as the Promised Land, the Heaven on Earth, the earthly paradise, and raises the question of whether Americans should continue to reside in their innocence or mature and look at the world with the eyes of grown-ups. The world that is revealed in front of them then will be a treacherous one, offering not the consolation of learning who you are but the confrontation of a double image, a supernatural projection of your own self that undermines the stability of the "pedagogic existence" of the nation and offers the disconcerting presence of the Other as an endless fracturing of the national discourse, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha.

Moreover, in 1904 Henry James came to the realization that

> [t]hat loud primary stage of alienism which New York most offers to sight – operates, for the native, as their [the aliens'] note of settled possession, somebody they have nobody to thank for; so that *un*settled possession is what we, on our side, seem reduced to – the implication of which, in its turn, is that, to recover confidence and regain lost ground, we, not they, must make the surrender and accept the orientation. We must go, in other words, *more* than half-way to meet them; which is all the difference, for us, between possession and dispossession. (67)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century and today, such an idea seems totally out of the way – in the first political advertisement for President Bush's campaign for re-election, for example, the message is as far as possible from the message Henry James tried to send to the Americans a hundred years ago insisting instead on a support for Bush's "policy of pre-emptive self-defence." As the *New York Times* described it:

> The 30-second advertisement gives the first sampling of the powerful array of images Mr. Bush's campaign team will have at its disposal when it begins what is expected to be a formidable advertising campaign. With somber strings playing in the background, the commercial flashes the words "Strong and Principled Leadership" before cutting to Mr. Bush standing before members of Congress. Intended to call out the Democrats for their opposition to Mr. Bush's military strategy of pre-emptively striking those who pose threats to the nation, the screen flashes "Some call for us to retreat, putting our national security in the hands of others," then urges viewers to tell Congress "to support the president's policy of pre-emptive self-defence." (Rutenberg 2003)

The message, although suggesting again an approach to the Other, sees that not as an attempt to understand the Other, but as an attempt to annihilate the Other, who is different and, as a result, is viewed as an ominous threat.

This is even more obvious with Trump's Executive Order on birth-right citizenship. As Margaret Stock, an immigration lawyer from California, has put it for *The New York Times*'s article "Skilled Legal Workers Find They, Too, Are Targets of Trump Citizenship Order" from Feb. 11, 2025, "It appears the Trump administration is trying to stop immigration, period, because nobody in their right mind would want to come here on a work visa if they thought their kid born here would be undocumented" (as cited in Jordan 2025). Immigration, however, is the very rock on which the American nation sits, and Henry James, as "dispossessed" of his native land as he felt, very succinctly rephrases Crevecoeur's famous question "What, then is the American, this new man?" into

> Who and what is an alien, when it comes to that, in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history? – peopled, that is, by migrations at once extremely recent, perfectly traceable and urgently required […]. Which is the American, by these scant measures? – which is not the alien, over a large part of the country at least, and where does one put a finger on the dividing line, or, for that matter, "spot" and identify any particular phase of the conversion, any one of its successive moments? (125–126)

Henry James, himself was not sure what to make of the "diffused intensity" of the "ethnic" outlook, but he painfully realized that despite his bewilderment and sense of being dispossessed of his native New York, he could not praise the "tolerably neutral and colourless image" of the immigrant who has managed to get rid of his past and become Americanized: "He resembles the dog who sniffs round the freshly-acquired bone, … but [does] not directly attack it" (97).

Thus, Henry James's *The American Scene* turns into an endless dialogue with his own self, a questioning of the stability and the normativity of one's own identity, which can never be conceived as a stable one. In this sense, it seems important to remember today that what you are is a process of becoming rather than a fixed state, as Henry James has so succinctly shown in his book. Moreover, this process should be seen as part of the cultural flows characterizing the world today. And if we are not to lose the distinctiveness and the cultural diversity, which should continue to be the basis of culture throughout the present century, this process should not be captured and contained within a certain limit. In other words, we should not permit to be "washed out of our color in the terrible tank" of cultural assimilation, as Henry James warns us, in order to become suitable subjects for immigration and naturalization.

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