

Urszula Gołębiowska
University of Zielona Góra

MOVING BEYOND (CULTURAL) CRITICISM IN HENRY JAMES'S LATE TRANSATLANTIC ENCOUNTERS

Abstract

The essay examines Henry James's late reengagements with America enacted in his travelogue *The American Scene* (1907) and his tale *A Round of Visits* (1910). Featuring Europeanized Americans returning to the United States after a long absence, both texts explore a complex relationship between the altered culture and the visitors' shifting attitude towards it. The essay demonstrates that it is those shifts in the autobiographical narrator's or character's stance that allow them to overcome a customary critical attitude and engage differently with the ambiguously familiar/unfamiliar reality. A detached position, initially adopted, produces responses which reflect the repatriated observer's alienation and a harsh criticism of American commercial culture, while immersion in the reality results in the abandonment of the detached, critical stance, allowing for a different, non-intentional engagement with the scene. By foregrounding other than intellectual modes of seeing and experiencing, the texts problematize the very idea of definitive judgment and masterful stance vis-à-vis reality. As the insights presented in the analyzed works are later echoed in Walter Benjamin as well as in Proust, their conceptions of 'intentionless state of being' and 'involuntary memory' respectively were enlisted to illuminate James's characters' experience.

Keywords: America, commercial culture, criticism, perception shift

Henry James's works abound in intercultural encounters which invariably explore the difficulty of understanding otherness, both cultural and individual. Inscribed in the writer's general epistemological skepticism, this impossibility of extracting meaning from an unfamiliar reality is thrown into relief in his late transatlantic writings which document experiences of Europeanized Americans returning to the United States after a long time away from the country. James's travelogue *The American Scene* (1907), which established the writer as a cultural critic, as well as subsequent short fictions, *The Jolly Corner* (1908) and *A Round of Visits* (1910), were inspired by the writer's own 1904-5

visit to America after a twenty-year absence¹. The theme of repatriation explored in these texts features an autobiographical narrator or a fictional Europeanized American, whose return to America occasions an encounter with a culture not only different from its European counterpart, but also radically altered from what it had been.

The motif of repatriation represents an obvious, geographical shift in James's signature international theme, which, in many of his novels and tales from the late 1870s to the early 1900s, involves Americans in Europe, confronted with the baffling Old World. In critical evaluations of the theme, the impossibility of understanding the foreign culture those works dramatize has been often attributed to American innocence (or ignorance) faced with sophistication and duplicity embodied in European characters. In fact, far from mere victims of European cynicism, James's Americans often figure as crudely materialistic and acquisitive, displaying a neo-colonial attitude to Europe – a site of cultural re-discovery and appropriation². This attitude may also take the form of a desire to possess otherness through knowledge, which effectively prevents the characters from relating to a different culture. Thus, regardless of the configurations of power inherent in the international theme, casting Americans either as victims or perpetrators of exploitation, the motif of failure to understand otherness figures prominently in the 'international' works.

This failure to comprehend an unfamiliar culture in James's transatlantic writings involves a complex interplay of the external and the internal, evident in the impact of the foreign or quasi-foreign culture on the visiting outsider and, conversely, the influence of the stance he adopts on the observed reality. The purpose of this essay is to examine both fictional and non-fictional reengagements with America enacted in *The American Scene* and in James's last published tale *A Round of Visits*. My aim is to interrogate these texts in terms of representations of space and its inhabitants which

¹ The 1980s and 1990s mark a discovery of Henry James as a cultural critic in addition to his well-established reputation as an innovative proto-modernist writer. James's legitimacy as a cultural critic has been debated ever since, with assessments of his achievement in the field ranging from enthusiastic, emphasizing the writer's perceptiveness and wide implications of his observations such as Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity. Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York and Oxford 1991), to more critical studies, e.g. Mark Seltzer's *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca 1984). Despite the controversy, or perhaps because of it, *The American Scene*, the writer's classic text of cultural criticism, has been in recent years widely read and commented upon.

² Priscilla Roberts (*The Geopolitics of Literature: the Shifting International Scene in the Works of Henry James*, "The International History Review" 2012, no 34.1) argues that the emergence of acquisitive American tendencies in James's fiction of the early 1900s coincides with the growing political and economic importance of the United States on the international scene, particularly evident in the Venezuela crisis or the 1898 Spanish-American War over Cuba. The fact that James's twentieth-century novels repeatedly stage exploitations of Europe by predatory Americans correlates, in Roberts's view, with the writer's perception of the shift in the international position of the United States and his indictment of America's emerging imperialism (pp. 100-101). However, it is worth mentioning that those tendencies are evident as early as in James's 1877 novel *The American*.

highlight the most problematic aspects of America. The complex response they evoke in the repatriated narrator or character depends as much on the scene encountered as on the observer's attitude towards it. As I will argue in this essay, it is shifts in the narrator's or character's stance that allow them to overcome the customary critical attitude and engage differently with the ambiguously familiar/unfamiliar reality.

A corresponding polarity of the autobiographical narrator's position is recognized in the Prologue to *The American Scene*. Due to his long absence from the country, he "had had time to become almost as 'fresh' as an inquiring *stranger*, [he] had not on the other hand had enough to cease to be, or at least to feel, as acute as an initiated *native*"³. A repatriated native, the narrator searches for and registers familiar "sights, sounds, smells" (AS 3) which, inevitably, become mixed with or even drowned by the strange and the unfamiliar, making him feel like an "inquiring stranger." The mixture of familiarity and strangeness does not deter the observer from deriving pleasure from the "chaos of confusion and change", where "recognition became more interesting and more amusing in proportion as it became more difficult, like the spelling-out of foreign sentences of which one knows but half the words" (AS 5). The trope of impeded readability captures the challenging confrontation with early twentieth-century America, profoundly transformed by the recent industrialization, building boom, and mass immigration. As John F. Sears observes, "change itself – rapid and unrestrained – had become the dominant characteristic of American life"⁴.

Not only is the narrator's native/alien status ambiguous, but also his response to the complex scene is far from definitive and unequivocal, for it depends on the stance adopted vis-à-vis the observed reality. On the one hand, the "restless analyst," as the narrator often refers to himself, assumes a detached, intellectual attitude to the American scene, apparent in his explicit critique of the hollowness and vulgar materiality of American culture (AS 12). Random impressions occasioned by city or country sights give rise to scathingly critical remarks about the domination of the commercial aspect at the expense of other values. The objective, analytical position is, however, difficult to maintain, for the narrator is not only a critic wishing to penetrate the surface of reality and capture the essence of the American scene, but also a "repentant absentee," deeply interested, curious, and emotionally involved (AS 6). Tellingly, after lengthy reflections about New York skyscrapers obliterating the city's past, the air seems to issue an admonition: "[I]t's all very well to 'criticize,' but you distinctly take an interest and are the victim of your interest [...] You care for the terrible town" (AS 83). The interest, restless curiosity, and emotional attitude that the narrator embodies are clearly at odds with

³ H. James, *The American Scene*, New York 1994, p. 3, emphasis added. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by the abbreviation AS and page number.

⁴ J. F. Sears, *Introduction, The American Scene*, New York 1994, p. XI.

the detachment of the cultural critic, whose facile condemnation cannot give justice to the complex reality. An alternative to the critical stance seems to be an immersion in the material reality and a relaxation of the desire for intellectual domination, which will facilitate a radically different response.

The narrator's initial critical stance is apparent in his response to the New York skyscraper – the embodiment of the American commercial spirit, elevating money to the status of a universal principle and power. The narrator is appalled by how, unrestrained by a sense of the past or respect for cultural legacy, the commercial building boom has rendered the famous Trinity Church scarcely visible among recently erected towers (AS 60). While obscuring the view of the historic landmark, the skyscrapers represent “the expensively provisional,” serving only immediate commercial purposes as “triumphant payers of dividends” (AS 60). It is not only that “the very scale of things had changed” – the prominence of the skyscraper is also indicative and symbolic of a shift in values⁵. For the writer, the church's “smothered visibility,” caused by “those monsters of the mere market,” stands for American greed and pursuit of material profits at all costs (AS 63). It is not only the Trinity Church that has been affected: though less visible it is at least still there, while James's birthplace in Washington Square has vanished, replaced by another high, impersonal building, leaving the writer with the feeling “of having been amputated of half my history” (AS 71).

Interestingly, those bitter remarks are soon softened. The narrator realizes that succumbing too easily to the impulse to judge and condemn means that a chance for an “intellectual adventure” is renounced (AS 63). Driven by curiosity, he qualifies the initial critical response, wondering if there might not be more in the phenomena than at first admitted. The detached, masterful stance gives way to a desire to become immersed in impressions and submit to experience, followed by a brave decision to give himself up to the “thrill of Wall Street”(AS 63). As a result of the change of attitude, the narrator begins to admire the play of light and shade on the buildings, which lends “the white towers, all new and crude and commercial and over-windowed as they are, a fleeting distinction”(AS 63-4). Even the skyscraper overshadowing “poor old Trinity” is no longer merely ugly, but becomes endowed with the quality of romantic sublimity: “the vast money-making structure quite horribly, quite romantically justified itself, looming through the weather with an insolent cliff-like sublimity”(AS 65). After venturing inside one of the tall buildings, the narrator produces a suggestive image of “huge constructed and compressed communities, throbbing, through its myriad arteries and pores, with a single passion” (AS 64).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. IX.

The paratactic stringing of alliterative phrases, apparent in the sentences quoted above, represents a strategy that evinces an impulse toward a non-masterful recreation of the scene. Unable to penetrate the surface and grasp the essence of the “monstrous phenomena” which have “got ahead of [...] any possibility of poetic, of dramatic capture”, the narrator performs the opposite – the metonymic enacting of the impenetrable reality (AS 65). Momentary perceptions, registered without analysis or interpretation, convey a sense of immediacy and immersion in the world, clearly opposed to the previous mastery and detachment. It is the ubiquitous alliteration that, according to Gert Buelens, “weaves together the text in a [...] manner that is distinctly at odds with the penetrative thrust of the analysis to which that text purports to submit the American scene”⁶. An intellectual possession of the scene being out of reach, this linguistic strategy effects a transformation of the observed phenomena. The phrases, “crude and commercial”, “constructed and compressed communities” or “throbbing, through [...] pores [...] passion”, remain on the surface of the skyscraper impressions but, at the same time, through rhythm and alliteration, endow the recalcitrant reality with a continuity and order it manifestly lacks. To use Sharon Cameron’s words, the device reflects James’s implicit belief that “what is of value is not the apprehended object but the transforming apprehension”⁷. Instead of continuing to capture the phenomena in intellectual formulations, the narrator transforms his apprehension into a vision less threatening and reprehensible as it derives from being embedded in, not outside the reality.

Still, the critical impulse remains difficult to resist, which may be related to a protective function of the conventional discursive and intentional response to the modern city. In his essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, written more than thirty years after James’s travelogue, Walter Benjamin argues that the conscious engagement with reality allows the city dweller to minimize the impact of overwhelming and shocking impressions, but it also results in a diminished capacity to experience life. It is due to the fact that consciousness, acting as a protective shield, prevents impressions from being integrated at a deeper level of experience. Benjamin explains: “The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one’s life (*Erlebnis*).” *Erlebnis*, in contrast to the long, coherent *Erfahrung*, is reduced to isolated moments of sensation, impressions of the moment, unassimilable into deep

⁶ G. Buelens, *Henry James and the “Aliens”*. In *Possession of the American Scene*, Amsterdam 2002, p. 2.

⁷ S. Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*, Chicago 1991, p. 4.

experience, and leaving no memory trace⁸. The critical attitude of *The American Scene's* narrator, consistently with Benjamin's theory, helps to parry the shocks of reality, enacting a semblance of mastery and domination over the strange urban scene. However, it is in the immersive moments when he shies away from making categorical judgments that James embodies a non-appropriative, intentionless state of being, potentially capable of fostering true experience and reflection.

The movement from harsh criticism to the "transforming apprehension" is also visible in the narrator's response to the human scene encountered in a New York hotel. What initially strikes him at the Waldorf-Astoria is the self-sufficiency of the establishment operating according to its own laws and wholly devoted to making its guests happy. The success of the hotel management is readily apparent in the "perfect human felicity", which evokes the narrator's astonishment and envy (AS 80). All around him, in "the endless labyrinth" (AS 77) of the hotel, hundreds of people move around, sit "under palms and by fountains" in the opulent setting, obviously deriving pleasure from the performance of these collective and public "rites" (AS 81). The whole scene appears as if orchestrated by some all-American, invisible but pervasive master-spirit of management, capable of controlling and commanding the guests, while making them at the same time "think of themselves as delightfully free and easy" (AS 82).

The astounding ability of the hotel-spirit both to control and maintain the illusion of freedom is matched by its creative power. This managerial force, as James perceptively observes, does not mirror existing instincts but, as the spirit animating American capitalism, seeks to create an "insatiable desire for consumption"⁹. Thus, the "amazing hotel-world" (AS 78) aims not just at satisfying the desires of the public but, above all, at creating "new and superior ones". It "anticipates and plucks them forth even before they dawn" (AS 324), becoming the source of modern man's "manufactured instincts"¹⁰. The resulting social uniformity means that the scene is populated by types, mimetic selves, "merging completely with the [...] impersonal rhythms of the marketplace", devoid of individuality and incapable of mutuality¹¹. Arguably, the ease with which people yield to the coercive force of the market has a lot to do with the vacuity of American social life, strikingly devoid of sophistication and manners. This absence, felt most acutely by the writer, seems to derive from the American perception of money as the principal value, capable of compensating for all inconveniences, including manners. Money is the shortcut on the way to social advancement, enabling Americans to achieve a higher

⁸ W. Benjamin, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, [in:] idem, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York 2007, p. 163.

⁹ R. Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity. Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*, New York and Oxford 1991, p. 265.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 266.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 274.

status without experience, education, cultural tradition or sustained effort over time. The general “American formula” the Jamesian narrator has discovered is “[t]o make so much money that you won’t, that you don’t ‘mind,’ don’t mind anything”(AS 176). For the writer, however, it is impossible not to mind the “crude displays of wealth [...] lapses in genteel behavior [...] the accents in which people speak [...] their tone of voice”¹².

The narrator’s incisive observations become interrupted, as in the skyscraper analysis, by a momentary surrender to the appeal of the place. While the penetrating critique of the invisible mechanism operating behind the scenes exposes its coercive power (as well as resists its pressure), the narrator’s abandonment of the “analytic mastery” enables him “vicariously to enjoy the site’s control”¹³. Once the critical impulse relaxes, the hotel seems like “the golden glow in which one’s envy burned, and through which [...] one carried one’s charmed attention from one chamber of the temple to another” (AS 80). No longer able to analyze and interpret elements of the scene which become a “golden blur”, the narrator yields to the attraction of this “paradise peopled with unmistakable American shapes, yet in which, the general and the particular, the organized and the extemporized, the element of ingenuous joy below and the consummate management above, melted together and left one uncertain which of them one was, at a given turn of the maze, most admiring” (AS 81). Admiration and enjoyment replace the former need to explore and analyze, leaving the critic no longer a master of the scene, but possessed by it.

The ventures beyond analytic criticism played out in the analyzed fragments of *The American Scene* are consistent with the way James’s earlier fictions have problematized the possibility of achieving an intellectual grasp of the world and understanding of otherness, in short, the writer’s “unease with the knowing subject and with the prejudicial categories that organize the subject’s epistemological project”¹⁴. However, while in the travelogue the non-critical attitude to the observed reality is sought after and willingly embraced by the narrator, in his fictions it comes unannounced. The sudden revelation experienced by the protagonist at the end of James’s short story *A Round of Visits* releases him from the compulsion to look and judge. The experience involves a sense of being part of the world as well as a temporary disappearance of self-other dichotomy. Like in *The American Scene*, the protagonist’s response to reality shows an analogous movement from detachment to a sensibility grounded in the bodily presence and immersion in the world. The character’s shift of vision occurs when, touched by

¹² J. Sears, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

¹³ G. Buelens, *Henry James’s Oblique Possession: Plottings of Desire and Mastery in The American Scene*, “PMLA” 2001 no 116.2, p. 304.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 310.

the other, he becomes, impinged upon by the world, vulnerable and opening up to another mode of knowing.

Although *A Round of Visits* has been referred to as one of “the fictional embodiments, or the fictional twins of the impressions James documented in *The American Scene*”, the main character, Mark Monteith, is no restless analyst wishing to understand the altered American reality¹⁵. An accidental observer passing through a labyrinthine hotel and New York streets, he is not driven by the opposed impulses for sensual immersion and analytical detachment. Still, he is detached – it is his feelings that distance him from the world which he observes from the outside, filtering impressions through his inner turmoil. Similarly to the autobiographical narrator of *The American Scene*, Monteith is an American returning to his country after a long absence only to discover that his meagre assets had been embezzled by a friend and relative, Phil Bloodgood. Embarking upon the eponymous “round of visits”, Monteith meets with acquaintances and friends who, much to his frustration, fail to show interest in his story or offer consolation. The incommunicable grief isolates him, causing the New York scene, especially the hotel, to appear alien and menacing – at one and the same time a prison and a phantasmagoric jungle.

Monteith’s emotional separation effects a mode of seeing where his feelings and the impact of the scene converge in a highly idiosyncratic vision of reality. Separated from the outer world by the storm and a bout of grippe, Monteith feels alienated both from the hotel and its guests. His room on the tenth floor is a “high cage”, from which he watches the raging winter blizzard¹⁶. The Pocahontas hotel, reminiscent of the establishment described in *The American Scene*, is isolated from the outside world – a self-contained, “social scene in itself” (RV 847). When Monteith eventually ventures out of his room, he is shocked by the hotel’s décor and ambience – its “extraordinary masquerade of expensive objects, [...] the heavy heat, the luxuriance, the extravagance, the quantity, the colour” – and with the guests, the “vociferous, bright-eyed, and feathered creatures [...] half smothered between undergrowths of velvet and tapestry” (RV 847). This startlingly inhuman environment is likened to “some wondrous tropical forest” through which the character passes aimlessly, unable to stop thinking about Phil (RV 847). Thus the “high cage” of his room and the “massive labyrinth” of the hotel function as architectural metaphors for Monteith’s mind locked in and revolving around

¹⁵ C. Meissner, *Talking about Money: Art and Commerce in America*, [in:] *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. Peter Rawlings, London 2007, p. 275.

¹⁶ H. James, *A Round of Visits*, [in:] idem, *The American Novels and Stories of Henry James*, ed. F.O. Matthiessen, New York 1973, p. 845. Future references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by the abbreviation RV and page number.

itself (RV 844)¹⁷. His emotions are reflected in his perceptions, which in turn affect the observer: “the fauna and flora startled him alike, and among them his bruised spirit drew in and folded its wings” (RV 847). Through this dynamic, the objects of his perception enact his fear and isolation and, at the same time, deeply affect him, intensifying his alienation.

Implicit in Monteith’s perceptions is a criticism of American mercantile culture, even if the judgment is not intentional. His impressions of the hotel-jungle and its bird-like occupants owe their terms and analogies to the character’s emotional state, revealing at the same time his aesthetic and moral opposition to the American reality. What surfaces in Monteith’s disgust with the “great gaudy hotel” is an undisguised sense of superiority, not just in matters of taste, but also in moral perception, which is subsequently confirmed when he meets an old acquaintance, Mrs. Folliott (RV 844)¹⁸. Another victim of Phil Bloodgood’s, Mrs. Folliott is not interested in Monteith’s story, talks ceaselessly and vulgarly about her own loss, unable to rise to his “broader perceptions” (RV 848). Eventually, it becomes clear to Monteith that “she shouldn’t have the benefit of a grain of *his* vision or *his* version of what had befallen them” since “any shade of inward irony, would be Greek to Mrs. Folliott” (RV 849). In Monteith’s eyes, Mrs. Folliott, entirely preoccupied with her money, had no manners – an observation confirming his sense of superiority and distance. At the same time, he also remains blissfully unaware of inward irony – the woman’s inability to stop talking about her loss is mirrored in his own analogous obsession with Bloodgood.

Monteith’s alienation, effected in part by his emotional hurt, is also a mark of the condition of man in the modern metropolis. In his wanderings through the maze of the hotel and, later, the streets of New York, he remains detached, registering fragmentary sense impressions. They do not enter his inner experience and fail to provoke reflection or evoke associations with the past, remaining at the level of Walter Benjamin’s *Erlebnis*. As mentioned earlier, the dynamic at play here is that, while registering overwhelming or shocking impressions, the consciousness acts as a protective shield, preventing them from being integrated at a deeper level of experience. Paolo Jedlowski explains that the superficial impressions, “treated by the intellectual, conscious strata of the mind”, become divorced “from the deeper level where impressions can settle and lend themselves

¹⁷ See Victoria Coulson, *Prisons, palaces, and the architecture of the imagination*, [in:] *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. Peter Rawlings, London 2007. Coulson observes that “architecture is a richly creative metaphor for James”, providing examples of fictional buildings figuring as prisons, while the movement through them functions as a metaphor for thinking (170).

¹⁸ Monteith’s response to the hotel’s ugliness and conveniences resembles Mrs. Gereth’s reaction in *The Spoils of Poynton* to the “imbecilities of decoration” at Waterbath. Mrs. Gereth functions in the novel as an exponent of the superiority of taste. See: Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, London 1987, p. 35.

to the work of accumulation and association. Somehow, the impressions treated by awareness are cut off from their incorporation in the realm of *Erfahrung*: they remain ‘sterilized’ – as Benjamin states – from any further association¹⁹. Indeed, the shocking perceptions evoke implicit criticism and judgment in the traumatized protagonist, apparent in the animalistic associations – “the fauna and flora”, “vociferous, [...] and feathered creatures”. This conscious treatment neutralizes shock, but at the same time, prevents the character from engaging deeply with the world around him.

The protective aspect of *Erlebnis* is also apparent in the superficial treatment of momentary impressions that Monteith registers when he leaves the hotel to visit his old friend Mrs. Ash. The menacing urban landscape can be handled when treated as a string of superficial, fragmented, dream-like images, not followed by any association or reflection. That the impressions are paratactically strung together, intensifies the sense of fragmentation: “the void and chill”, “vague crossroads, radiations of roads to nothing”, the “long but still sketchy vista [...] of the northward Avenue, bright and bleak, fresh and harsh, rich and evident somehow” (RV 851). Monteith’s movement through the empty, inhospitable urban landscape repeats the alienating experience at the hotel, the analogy being apparent in the recurring animalistic imagery. The district in which he finds himself is “redeemed from desolation but by a passage [...] of a choked trolley-car that howled [...] beneath the weight of its human accretions” (RV 854). This grotesque image brings to mind the deformations of the expressionist paintings of the period as well as similar images in *The American Scene*²⁰. The “pushing male crowd, moving in its dense mass” (AS 65) through the streets of New York and the “trolley-cars stuffed to suffocation” evoke a vision of alienating (not necessarily peculiarly American) modernity, threatening to engulf the individual (AS 69). The dehumanized scene is not redeemed by the human contact that Monteith has been seeking in Mrs. Ash, who is not interested in the story he wishes to tell and takes advantage of his presence to talk about her marital problems.

The human connection Monteith has been longing for occurs, quite unexpectedly, during the last and most significant encounter in his round of visits. In Monteith’s view, the visit has been designed by Providence to save him from the “cultivation of the sin of selfishness, the obsession of egotism [...] by [...] directing his attention to the claims of others” (RV 855). No longer hoping to find a sympathetic ear, Monteith decides to see Newton Winch, another gripe sufferer and a classmate he has not seen in years to render him the service he has been all day expecting from others. This apparently

¹⁹ P. Jedlowski, *Simmel on Memory*, [in:] *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* Volume 119. *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, eds. Michael Kaern, Bernard S. Phillips, Robert S. Cohen, Dordrecht 1990, pp. 137-8.

²⁰ The painting that comes to mind is Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s “Nollendorfplatz” (1912).

selfless act he intends to perform is, however, not matched with a disinterested disposition – Monteith is anything but diverted from his obsession with Phil Bloodgood. It stirs again when the charming host, miraculously transformed from the coarse and common Winch of the past, expresses a surprising insight into his guest's state of mind: he divines that it must be due to a recent illness or a bad shock. Starved for attention and compassion, Monteith is moved to tears by this empathetic remark, but also very tense “for fear of too hysterically gushing” (RV 860). Still, he becomes emotional about Phil, and expresses a wish to help and understand his wrongdoer. Preoccupied with his ideas, Monteith fails to observe the impact of his compassion for Phil on the host. Winch warns him against seeking the embezzler, presumably, to spare him the torment of his victim's compassion. Eventually, as a result of Winch's interest in his suffering, Monteith's egotistic need to talk about himself subsides, “as if his personal case had already been *touched* by some tender hand” (RV 859, emphasis added). Evidently, the touch of the other diminishes the self-absorption that has so far dominated his vision.

Another curious effect of Winch's insightful observation is a gradual change in Monteith's perception of his host. At first sight, Winch seems immensely improved, an impression which is further intensified when he makes his touching remark – his empathy makes him appear “the most distinguished of men” to Monteith's “excited imagination” (RV 857). Soon, however, as if to highlight the unreliability of looking and judging, Monteith becomes aware of some vague quality, something other than his friend's improved appearance, which he is yet unable to identify. It is as if the touch of the other has initiated an altered mode of perception, less dependent on critical seeing and receptive to indirect stimuli. His host's body position and movements become suddenly full of significance. For the first time since Monteith's arrival, Winch appears “curiously different with his back turned [...]. Everything had changed – changed extraordinarily with the mere turning of that gentleman's back, the treacherous aspect of which its owner couldn't surely have suspected” (RV 863). Monteith's intuition is confirmed by Winch's confession – he is, like Phil Bloodgood, an embezzler of other people's money, waiting now for the police to arrest him.

The shock of the news and Winch's subsequent suicide mark the end of Monteith's self-absorption, initiating the final stage in his movement from the intellectually detached, critical perception to an embodied and immersed response to the world. When the police officer arriving at the scene asks him if he could not have prevented the accident, Monteith says that he “must practically have caused it” (RV 866). Regardless of how profound his illumination is, whether it concerns the sudden awareness of the effect of his confession on Winch, or extends to a more general perception of his responsibility – it is after all people, like himself, living comfortably in Europe off the proceeds from financial investments in America, who have created a demand for financial schemes – it

certainly involves a recognition of his participation in the observed reality. Shaken out of the obsession with Phil and the preoccupation with his own emotions, he is no longer the disembodied eyes and intellect, compelled to observe, understand and judge. The intellectual engagement with the world has given way to an immersion in reality and the realization of his mysterious implication in the lives of others.

That such insight does not result from an intentional pursuit of understanding confirms Walter Benjamin's belief that "truth is an intentionless state of being"²¹. The surrender of the intellect leads to another mode of seeing and knowing – the embodied response, resembling the non-intentional immersion in impressions in *The American Scene*. Benjamin's concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* which have been enlisted to comment on the character's experience, illuminate as well the change in his perceptions. The shock he undergoes seems to provide the necessary stimulus for the previously fragmented, phantasmagoric impressions to be unconsciously accessed, as in Proust's *memoire involontaire*, and transformed into a deep, reflected upon experience²². As Paolo Jedlowski explains, "in order to achieve a settlement of the contents of life as *Erfahrung*, an access of these contents themselves beyond the threshold of consciousness is necessary"²³. Under the influence of the shock, "Mark took a hundred things in, it seemed to him – things of the scene, of the moment, and of all the strange moments before" (RV 866). All kinds of connections, relations and associations between the hitherto discrete and fragmentary impressions as well as between himself and others have become apparent to the character who has moved from describing to being in the world.

Indisputably, both *The American Scene* and *A Round of Visits* give voice to James's harsh criticism of American commercial culture. At the same time, as so often in James, the texts problematize the very idea of criticism and judgment. The writer's distrust of the purely intellectual way of engaging with the world and a valuation of other modes of seeing and knowing attest to his proto-modernist sensibilities echoed in, among others, later ideas of Proust and Benjamin. What emerges from James's inquiries into the nature of truth and knowledge is a belief that a detached vision and categorical, definitive judgments cannot give justice to the complexity of the world, as we are always deeply implicated in the reality. The truth intentionally pursued refuses to be captured; it is accessed in unexpected epiphanies, brought about by the abandonment

²¹ Quoted in R. Posnock, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

²² Marcel Proust makes a distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory in the first volume of his *Remembrance of Things Past*. According to the writer, 'voluntary memory', being "in the service of the intellect", can retrieve information about the past, but is unable to retain any trace of the past. It is 'involuntary memory', triggered by some accidental event, that can bring back the past. See: Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, New York 1956, pp. 61-66.

²³ P. Jedlowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8.

of a self-interested vision, an immersion in the world and a brief erasure of the separation between the subject and object. In James's world, only those "intentionless state[s] of being" can offer fleeting glimpses of insight into the reality and the self.