

Henry James and the Father Question

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page viii
<i>Note on the text and brief titles</i>	ix
Introduction: the nature of inheritance	i
1 Autobiography and the writing of significance	24
2 Reading the ‘man without a handle’: Emerson and the construction of a partial portrait	61
3 ‘Under certain circumstances’: Jamesian reflections on the fall	99
4 Doing ‘public justice’: New England reform and <i>The Bostonians</i>	141
5 Breaking the mould	175
Conclusion: ‘the imminence of a transformation scene’	199
<i>Notes</i>	209
<i>Index</i>	227

1

Autobiography and the writing of significance

In ‘The Diary of a Man of Fifty’, a short story first published in 1879, Henry James describes a man actively engaged in the process of reconstituting his past – a process not dissimilar to that which would characterise James’s own autobiographical narratives of over thirty years later. In a succession of diary entries (in themselves a form of autobiography) the middle-aged hero of James’s tale, revisiting Florence, is prompted to revive memories of an unhappy love affair conducted there years before. Initially the past seems quite familiar, a sequence of events recalled with unerring accuracy. ‘Everything is so perfectly the same’, he notes, ‘that I seem to be living my youth over again.’¹ But the process of memory soon proves to be surprising, as things once thought forgotten return unexpectedly to active consciousness, prompting the narrator to ask, ‘What in the world became of them? Whatever becomes of such things, in the long intervals of consciousness? Where do they hide themselves away? In what unvisited cupboards and crannies of our being do they preserve themselves?’ (334). The sequence of unearthed memories proves endless, chaotic and a touch oppressive (‘They have been crowding upon me ever so thickly’ (339)), with each recollection suggestive of something further: ‘Everything reminds me of something else, and yet of itself at the same time.’ The diarist’s recapturing of the image of his lost love becomes a physical as much as a mental act, one in which his senses strain to be released from the confines of the present: ‘The place was perfectly empty – that is, it was filled with her. I closed my eyes and listened; I could almost hear the rustle of her dress on the gravel’ (335).

This emergence of unexpected memories is encouraged by his encounters with the daughter of the woman he had once loved and with that daughter’s suitor, a man who seems to the diarist to be so perfectly the embodiment of his earlier self that he is led to declare with amazement

that 'the analogy is complete' (340). James's sentient central character feels himself to be re-experiencing his past through this surrogate self, for, commenting on the suitor's bliss, he remarks, 'I confess that in the perception of his happiness I have lived over again my own' (351). The idea of 'living over again', in the sense of not merely recalling the past as a museum piece, preserved and labelled, but encountering it anew in different ways and for different purposes, is central to the epistemological process at work in the Jamesian autobiography (that of father *and* son). Indeed at the beginning of *A Small Boy and Others* James declares his desire 'at the same time to live over the spent experience itself' (*A*, 3), such that apparently exhausted ('spent') history may be reanimated by the process of memory. As Wolfgang Iser has observed, in a discussion of Laurence Sterne's novel of autobiographical strategies *Tristram Shandy* but also in terms which can usefully be applied to James here, 'writing can never coincide with life, and facing up to this fact is a sign of the moral integrity of the historian'. Indeed, such integrity is 'violated whenever life and representation appear to coincide'. Autobiographies that seem to achieve such matching 'are nothing but illusory fulfilments of set purposes which substitute interpretations of life for life itself'.² By a deliberate aestheticising of the autobiographical project, both Henry Jameses attempt to articulate a sense of their own understanding of themselves and of the routes which have led to such understanding; both use the autobiographical form as a means of capturing the essences of certain experiences, essences which render creative significance to their lives in more fundamental ways than would adherence to mere chronological accuracy or factual fidelity.³

I

One of the earliest extended sequences of memory in *A Small Boy and Others* is James's recollection of the building of the Hudson River Railroad in New York in 1851, part of the New York Central Rail line that linked New York City with towns further north in the state and ran parallel with the Erie Canal. As a boy walking home from his tutor's house, the construction scene presented to his impressionable imagination 'a riot of explosion and a great shouting and waving of red flags', a potentially dangerous arena, a 'test' demanding a demonstration of bravery if it were to be passed successfully. James recollects that 'the point of honor among several of us, was of course nobly to defy the danger, and I feel again the emotion with which I both hoped and feared that the red flag, lurid signals descried from afar, would enable or compel us to renew the feat'. But instead of continuing to brave the 'fragments of rock' which would 'hurtle through the air and smite to the earth another and yet another of

the persons engaged or exposed', James prefers to describe an alternative route ('one of the other perambulations of the period') (*A*, 15). His young self walks home via 'the country-place, as I supposed it to be, on the northeast corner of Eighteenth Street', a brownstone mansion whose grounds teemed with animal life, 'browsing and pecking and parading creatures'. The recollection of this scene prompts James to 'wonder at the liberty of range and opportunity of adventure allowed to my tender age', and he concludes, with the benefit of an autobiographer's hindsight, that his childhood freedom 'can only have had for its ground some timely conviction on the part of my elders that the only form of riot or revel ever known to me would be that of the visiting mind' (*A*, 16).

The workings of the 'visiting mind' ensure that the past is not so much retold as created anew by the imagination. Barriers of time and space are dissolved as, from the comfort of Lamb House, the elderly James sensually revisits and re-experiences the scenes of his childhood, simultaneously present at his younger self's wanderings: 'I at any rate watch the small boy dawdle and gape again, I smell the cold dusty paint and iron on rails of the Eighteenth Street corner rub his contemplative nose' (*A*, 16–17). The image of the boy studying the collection of animals becomes evidence for the autobiographer of his future. Just as the autobiographical project as a whole can be considered as James's final preface to the work of his writing life, so this childhood experience is conceived as the germ or *donnée* of a story that expands into the career of the novelist, enabling him to trace the seeds of himself as a mature imaginative artist back to their origin: 'He is a convenient little image or warning of all that was to be for him . . . For there was the very pattern and measure of all he was to demand: just to be somewhere – almost anywhere would do – and somehow receive impressions or an accession, feel a relation or a vibration' (*A*, 17). In this episode the young James is situated by his older self at a moment of intersection in urban development, at the point where the burgeoning industrialisation of New York is encroaching on the more pastoral world of the country house and its animals. Henry Ward Beecher, the popular New York clergyman and journalist, described the changing situation in a sketch of 1854, sympathising with those living in mansions such as that which the young James passes and who now find themselves at the mercy of the new technology. The owner of such a property all of a sudden discovers that

his own grounds are wanted. Through that exquisite dell which skirts along the northern side of his estates, where he has wandered, book in hand, a thousand times, monarch of squirrels, bluejays and partridges, his only companions and subjects – are seen peering and spying those execrable men that turn the world upside down, civil engineers and most uncivil speculators. Alas! the plague has

broken out. His ground is wanted – is taken – is defiled – is daily smoked by the passage of the modern thunder-dragon, dragging its long tail of cars . . . They have spoiled one of God's grandest pictures by slashing it with a railroad.⁴

Although, as Ross Posnock has pointed out, the 'denaturing' of the landscape of New York by the railroad was 'inseparable from the construction of a new category of the natural',⁵ ensuring that the small boy was located in a shifting and transitional geography, Henry James is nevertheless quite specific about his choice of route – past a fragile but still resistant pastoralism. It is a journey which is significant, for, as James weighs the evidence of his memory, he can recall no repetition of the walk home via the railroad, a walk which would involve him in a public display of masculine bravery, a burst of defining action in the face of America's newest animal, the 'modern thunder-dragon' of technological progress. The alternative has the advantage of possessing the more private delights of the country scene with its 'more vivid aspects, greater curiosities and wonderments' (*A*, 16).

Such a rejection of public action, turning instead to the 'far from showy practice of wondering and dawdling and gaping' (*A*, 17), was a decision, I suggest, encouraged by the peculiar circumstances of the James household and the powerful presence (in both positive and negative senses) of its patriarch. James Senior's interrogation of the self inspired an irreverence towards conventional modes of authority and identity. An abjuration of society's constructions and its expectations of the individual pervades his writing: 'Society affords no succour to the divine life in man', he states. 'Any culture we can give to that life, is owing not to society, but to our fortunate independence of it.'⁶ 'Society' for the elder James entailed the accumulation of both formal and informal social restrictions – it could be any social institution or any commonly recognised moral authority, since morality and society were, for him, two aspects of the same proposition. This suspicion of hegemonic structures promoted a commitment to willed vulnerability, an openness to unfamiliar experience which embodied a strategic resistance to the constricting ideologies of both genteel New England culture and the more aggressive, individualising aspects of rapid American urbanisation.

With the publication of *Democracy in America* (in two parts, 1835 and 1840), Alexis de Tocqueville emerged as one of the earliest commentators on this latter phenomenon. Discussing the American inclination to construct society around the totem of the primacy and stability of the individualised self, he argued that the philosophical tradition of America was relatively unformed compared with that found in Europe. The principal 'philosophical method' employed by the New World citizen, de Tocqueville suggested, was one in which 'each American appeals only to

the individual effort of his own understanding'. Furthermore, this was the manifestation of a philosophy that, although not identified and categorised, was nevertheless inevitable given the circumstances in which the nation found itself. Although 'Americans do not read the works of Descartes, because their social condition deters them from speculative studies', they nevertheless 'follow his maxims, because this same social condition naturally disposes their minds to adopt them'. The absence of European class distinctions, the growth of social mobility and the rapid accumulation of wealth had ensured that 'every one shuts himself up in his own breast, and affects from that point to judge the world'. De Tocqueville warned that the elevation of this essentialised self to a position of omniscience inevitably led to a belief in that self's infallibility. 'As [Americans] perceive that they succeed in resolving without assistance all the little difficulties which their practical life presents,' he wrote, 'they readily conclude that everything in the world may be explained, and that nothing in it transcends the limits of the understanding.'⁷ The effect of American democratic life on the habit and practise of philosophy was thus to divorce the mind from the influence of tradition, the accumulated knowledge of the past, and to throw it back instead on the notion of individual authority as the supreme interpretive agency. For de Tocqueville, this signified a dangerous and impractical state of affairs in which the goal of social consensus – indeed the goal of social cohesion – would be forever unattainable:

If every one undertook to form all his own opinions, and to seek for truth by isolated paths struck out by himself alone, it would follow that no considerable number of men would ever unite in any common belief. But obviously without such common belief no society can prosper, – say, rather, no society can exist; for without ideas held in common, there is no common action, and without common action there may still be men, but there is no social body. (146)

The 'independence of individual minds' is all well and good to a degree, but 'unbounded it cannot be' (147). Although de Tocqueville was careful to distinguish individualism ('a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows' (193)) from solipsistic excess ('a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with himself, and to prefer himself to everything in the world' (192–3)), he nevertheless was pessimistic about the prospects of individualism. 'In the long run', he warned, 'it attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness' (193).

As Ian Watt notes, the very word *individualism* was coined by Henry Reeve, the first translator of de Tocqueville's text, to describe the unique American conditions, the French *individualisme* having no existing

English-language equivalent.⁸ *Democracy in America* identifies both the establishment of an orthodoxy of individualism – one might paradoxically say its institutionalisation – and the nation's affirmation of the link between individual identity and epistemological stability. Against de Tocqueville's strictures, Emerson takes up (although does not acknowledge) Descartes' formulation of *cogito ergo sum* in his essay 'Self-Reliance' (1841) to describe a state of affairs in which he sees that stability now compromised: 'Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say "I think," "I am," but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose' (*CWE*, I, 67). Of course there is an unrecognised irony in that Emerson is paraphrasing another writer at the same time as he warns of the dangers of such indebtedness. Nevertheless, as I discuss in chapter 3, here is a characteristic description of one of the consequences of the fallen condition: a debilitating outbreak of self-consciousness (man is 'ashamed') which prevents an original relationship to the universe. No longer able to proclaim a secure individuality, to exercise and express self-authorship, man is compromised and reliant upon other authorities. Lacan's formulation of the 'mirage which renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself' has been shown to be just that – a mirage.⁹ The posture of Emerson's man is dented; the upright figure, embodiment of the *I* pronoun, now slumped and uncertain.¹⁰

That the elder James's dismissal of the social ('our fortunate independence of it') seems to conform to a definitive Emersonian position is a judgement requiring qualification. The American celebration of a unitary and apparently infallible self, socially reinforced and mandated, was something he sought to question. Cartesian self-complacency was rejected for a conception of selfhood created through process, through a vibrant and often difficult dynamic *with* society which instils a sense of identity, but which in turn is found to be only provisional and ultimately unsatisfactory: 'the process of creation involves or necessitates a two-fold consciousness on the part of the creature; first a finite or imperfect consciousness, or a consciousness of selfhood distinct from God; and second, an infinite or perfect consciousness, a consciousness of a selfhood united with God'.¹¹ The formation of this second, true selfhood involves 'no ostentatious self-assertion, no dazzling parade of magical, irrational, or irresponsible power'; rather it depends upon 'an endless humiliation',¹² upon the realisation of 'a burdensome and abject servitude, from which there is no release but in the fetterless air of the spiritual world'.¹³ James Senior's notion of an identity based on process, rather than one rooted in the security of a specific society, finds a telling parallel in Francis Grund's *The Americans, in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations* (1837). Grund, an Austrian who had emigrated to America in 1827 and who was to

live there for over ten years, offered an alternative conception to de Tocqueville's focus on the physical and political factors influencing the genesis of the American sensibility. For him, America was not defined by its actual geography but existed as an imaginative moral site which could never be destroyed since it was always in the process of being realised. America was present only as an idea, a potential location, and the world acted as the means by which that potentiality could actualise itself (albeit imperfectly):

America is to [the American] but the physical means of establishing a moral power, the medium through which his mind operates – the local habitation of his political doctrines. *His country is in his understanding*; he carries it with him wherever he goes, whether he emigrates to the shores of the Pacific or the Gulf of Mexico; his home is wherever he finds a mind congenial with his own. (my emphasis)¹⁴

James Senior shared this conception of society based not on local conditions of nationality and race but rather one united in a moral project still to be achieved. Mankind's 'great final development into the unity of the race, is what remains for us to see; that development which shall make all the nations of the earth one society . . . when in a word his sympathies shall flow forth towards every brother of the race, according to the good that is in him'.¹⁵

The limitations of the socially sanctioned realm of activity or construction of identity might be opposed by the recognition of alternative potentials or unexpected combinations. Incongruity and contradiction were central to the James family ethos – James remarks that 'the presence of paradox was so bright' that the children 'breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions' (*A*, 124). The intellectual ferment emanating from the family is evident in a letter written by William in which he describes 'people swarming about . . . killing themselves with thinking about things that have no connection with their merely external circumstances, studying themselves into fevers, going mad about religion, philosophy, love . . . breathing perpetual heated gas and excitement, turning night into day' (*WJ*, 1, 225). The tone of dissatisfaction, of detachment from the fray, which William's words express is present again in a more significant form in *A Small Boy and Others*. Recalling their walks together in London and Paris, Henry discloses details of a conversation he had with his brother in 'after days':

W.J. denounced it to me . . . as a poor and arid and lamentable time, in which, missing such larger chances and connections as we might have reached out to, we had done nothing, he and I, but walk about together, in a state of direct propriety . . . We might, I dare say, have felt higher impulses and carried out larger plans – though indeed present to me for this, on my brother's so

expressing himself, is my then quick recognition of the deeper stirrings and braver needs he at least must have known, and my perfect if rueful sense of having myself had no such quarrel with our conditions: embalmed for me did they even to that shorter retrospect [*sic*] appear in a sort of fatalism of patience, spiritless in a manner, no doubt, yet with an inwardly active, productive and ingenious side. (A, 170)

James depicts his brother here as the intellectual superior, defining himself as deferring to William's need for greater and more challenging stimulation, 'the larger chances and connections', compared to his own less substantial requirements. William is elevated in his apparent thirst for 'higher impulses' and 'larger plans'; the more easily pleased Henry had 'no such quarrel with our conditions'. James makes a concession in the direction of his brother – no doubt the circumstances were 'spiritless' – but for him they still retained an 'active, productive and ingenious' quality. Despite his own feelings of personal fulfilment, James seriously entertains an alternative, less reassuring judgement of his childhood existence, namely that 'we had done nothing'. That this possibility endangers the very ontological foundations of the small boy which James has attempted to establish for the reader is clearly recognised, and he proceeds to consider William's argument once again before finally rejecting it:

What could one have asked more than to be steeped in a medium so dense that whole elements of it, forms of amusements, interest and wonder, soaked through to some appreciative faculty and made one fail at the most of nothing but one's lessons? My brother was right in so far as that my question – the one I have just reproduced – could have been asked only by a person incorrigible in throwing himself back upon substitutes for lost causes, substitutes that might temporarily have appeared queer and small; a person so haunted, even from an early age, with visions of life, that aridities, for him, were half a terror and half an impossibility, and that the said substitutes, the economies and ingenuities that protested, in their dumb vague way, against weakness of situation or of direct and applied faculty, were in themselves really a revel of spirit and thought.

(A, 171)

Resonances queer and small, dumb and vague, stand in opposition and in preference to the more obvious intellectual rewards of 'direct and applied faculty'. Henry finally cannot share his brother's suspicion of apparently pointless drifting; unlike William, he feels that such activity provides an energy and vitality, a potential source of creativity which, he insists, only 'temporarily' seems purposeless. Again the autobiographer has an eye on his younger self's future development.

The foregrounding in the narrative of the process of 'taking in' experience nevertheless remains problematic for James, and the passage describing William's doubts about the value of such a strategy as a mode of *living* (their 'perambulations', James thought, signified for his brother

their 'poverty of life' (*A*, 172)) reflects Henry's own anxieties throughout the text about a narration that voraciously consumes so much diversity but that may not, finally, cohere in any meaningful form. James's uneasiness is made apparent by his constant anticipation of the reader's response to his narrative, a continual attempt to air possible objections in order to pre-empt them: 'I am divided between their [James's memories] still present freshness and my sense of perhaps making too much of these tiny particles of history', he worries at one point (*A*, 15). This doubt can only afford to be momentary though, for on its dismissal depends the continuation of the ambitious project on which he has embarked. Thus he moves to reassure himself and us of the significance of his text: 'no particle that counts for memory or is appreciable to the spirit can be too tiny, and that experience, in the name of which one speaks, is all compact of them and shining with them' (*A*, 16). This rapid transition from doubt to artistic justification is replayed throughout *A Small Boy and Others*: the disquieting possibility that James's 'assimilations small and fine' are merely 'refuse, directly interesting to the subject-victim only' is dispelled by the assertion that he feels himself to be 'morally affiliated, tied as by knotted fibres, to the elements involved' (*A*, 105) and thus aesthetically vindicated.

The 'vague processes' which William criticised, Henry 'came to glorify . . . and see . . . as part of an order really fortunate' (*A*, 199); the realms of action and speculation which William preferred to keep distinct are merged by his brother into a creative synthesis. Henry's 'pedestrian gaping' is his 'sole and single form of athletics' (*A*, 113). Ross Posnock has usefully described the uneasy tension existing within William's rhetorical strategies as indicative of a pragmatist's belief in 'overlap and continuity among individual streams of consciousness' combined with, and often overpowered by, a more repressive conviction that the self is 'an engine of rationalistic control, shaping its experience by ceaselessly selecting and eliminating'.¹⁶ Pragmatism's vocabulary of fluidity, merging, development and uncertainty is contained within a philosophical framework that seeks to emphasise practicality and usefulness, to rein in the meandering extravagances of what William considered to be 'wayward theoretical curiosity and wonder' (Posnock's phrase; 40). Such language of restrained direction, implied in Henry's account of his brother's anxieties over the kind of apparently purposeless activity in which he, Henry, indulged, is revealed in a lecture William delivered before the Harvard Natural History Society. In 'Great Men, Great Thoughts and the Environment' (first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in October 1880), he suggests that the human mind becomes 'efficient' only 'by narrowing its point of view', otherwise 'what little strength it has is dispersed, and it loses its way altogether'. It is 'a necessity laid upon us as human beings to limit

our view' (my emphasis). In the interests of productivity, and to be able to perform most effectively the function of being human, the infinite perspective of the immature mind must be brought under control and into more specific focus. Later in the lecture William amplifies on this point in explicitly vocational terms:

Societies of men are just like individuals, in that both at any given moment offer ambiguous potentialities of development. Whether a young man enters business or the ministry may depend on a decision which has to be made before a certain day. He takes the place offered in the counting-house, and is *committed*. Little by little, the habits, the knowledge, of the other career, which lay so near, cease to be reckoned even among possibilities. At first, he may sometimes doubt whether the self he murdered in that decisive hour might not have been the better of the two; but with the years such questions themselves expire, and the old alternative *ego*, once so vivid, fades into something less substantial than a dream.¹⁷

The vocational uncertainties offered by the possibilities of alternative careers, William suggests, are dispelled once the choice of a particular direction has been made. But not only is this procrastination ended, the lingering presence of those alternative potentials, those other jobs unpursued, gradually fades, until finally that other self, representative of a life unlived, becomes something insubstantial and forgotten. Joseph Thomas has demonstrated how William developed a theory of 'habit' which was employed as a buttress against the myriad of forces at work in late nineteenth-century culture – what William called the 'big, blooming, buzzing confusion' of reality. 'Habit for James', Thomas writes, 'is meant to perform a kind of midwifery, easing entry into a more secure, less "uncanny" world'.¹⁸ So the philosopher's pragmatism is inflected with an awareness of limits, of protective structures which enable us to 'build the flux out'.¹⁹ In an 1879 review of a work by the philosopher Charles Renouvier (an early and lasting influence), William notes that 'in every wide theoretical conclusion we must seem more or less arbitrarily to *choose* our side'. Choice, even arbitrary choice, is essential for any philosophy which seeks to make a 'practical difference' in everyday life.²⁰

In the second lecture of his 1906 course on Pragmatism, William famously tells his anecdote of a camping trip during which a philosophical dispute arises over a hypothetical squirrel attached to and circling around a hypothetical tree trunk. The animal moves in tandem with an observer also circling the tree, such that it is always hidden. 'The resultant meta-physical problem now is this,' William writes. '*Does the man go round the squirrel or not?* He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel?' The solution to this conundrum lies in 'what you *practically mean* by "going round" the

squirrel . . . Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any further dispute.²¹ For William then, questions of truth are necessarily contingent and viewpoints are multiple. But ultimately such plurality and ambiguity needs resolution if the *practical* applicability of pragmatism is to have any currency. ‘Make the distinction’, William counsels, and once made the situation clarifies while still acknowledging the partial framework in which that clarification has been achieved. Whereas William seems to be advocating a gradual sharpening of focus and a necessary division of labour – Howard Feinstein describes his ‘keen awareness of . . . the disastrous psychological consequences of the failure to recognize and affirm the boundaries between persons’²² – Henry James is happy to rest in the act of observation. His is a paradoxically self-conscious and energetic feat of non-participation, one in which the demands of the enquiring mind can never be satisfied fully. James’s ‘vague processes’ depend upon further, but never final, interpretation. Again, Charles Sanders Peirce proves helpful, for his notion of ‘vagueness’ is of a kind which, ‘leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, . . . reserves for some other possible . . . experience the function of completing the determination’.²³ It is worth noting that the additional clarifying piece of information is only ‘possible’, for absolute elucidation can never be assured, although attempts at closure may be endlessly offered.

The notion that everything is potentially significant, that nothing lies outside the realm of experience, was promoted by the James family’s idiosyncratic estimation of ‘waste’, of that usually deemed inconsequential. James Senior displayed a deliberate perversity in his concern for ‘the whole side of the human scene usually held least interesting’. He found in what was conventionally considered waste ‘much character and colour and charm, so many implications of the fine and worthy’ which ‘enlarged not a little our field and our categories of appreciation and perception’ (*A*, 301–2). The frantic atmosphere of heated intellectual stimulation, to which William’s letter quoted earlier alluded, is present in Henry’s claim that the family ‘breathed somehow an air in which waste, for us at least, couldn’t and didn’t live, so certain were aberrations and discussions, adventures, excursions and alarms of whatever sort, to wind up in a “transformation scene”’ (*A*, 302). Nothing was considered irrelevant – irrelevance indeed was celebrated for its ‘intensity and plausibility and variety’ (*A*, 112). At the most base level, for example, the use of sewage in European agriculture had become for James Senior a powerful symbol of how the material makes possible the spiritual: ‘Only think of this! Europe actually depends for her material salvation upon a divine redemption mercifully stored up for her in substances which her most pious churchmen and wisest statesmen have always disdained as an unmitigated nuisance!’ That which we ‘would gladly hurry into the abyss

of oblivion', he marvelled, 'teems with incomparably greater renovation to human society than all the gold, silver, and precious stones ever dug from earth to madden human lust and enslave human weakness!'²⁴ Henry James echoed this interest in the excremental when considering his sense of the value of his first trip to Italy in 1869. 'Let it lie warm and nutritive at the base of my mind, manuring and enriching its roots', he instructed himself rhetorically (*Letters*, I, 208).

James returned to the notion of 'waste' again three years prior to the publication of *A Small Boy and Others*, contributing to the collection of essays brought together under the title *In After Days: Thoughts on the Future Life*. (It also included writing from such contemporaries as Julia Ward Howe, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and William Dean Howells.) That James's philosophical piece was a departure from his preferred prose forms, that with it he was approaching literary territory more comfortably inhabited by his father and brother, is something of which he was well aware. Writing to Elizabeth Jordan, the editor of *Harper's Bazar* (the magazine that had originally commissioned the collection), he confessed to finding 'the little business distinctly difficult, so that I had – it being a sort of thing that is so little in my "chords", to work it out with even more deliberation than I had allowed time for'.²⁵ The finished composition, 'Is There a Life After Death?', reveals its author pondering with great care the difficulty of determining what can be considered extraneous – what in fact constitutes a wasted life – and alive to the danger of asserting too narrow a conception of value. Such an assertion, James believes, is indicative of an arrogance which may serve only to reveal the actual inadequacies of our understanding:

The probability is, in fact, that what we dimly discern as waste the wisdom of the universe may know as a very different matter. We don't think of slugs and jellyfish as the waste, but rather as the amusement, the attestation of wealth and variety, of gardens and sea-beaches; so why should we, under stress, in respect to the human scene and its discussable sequel, think differently of dull people?²⁶

The infinite variety of reactions which consciousness displays, its creative awareness, is evidence for James of 'us as establishing sublime relations', after which, he asks, 'how can we . . . hold complete disconnection likely?' (228). Consciousness then is 'consecrated' (elsewhere James writes of 'the consecration of knowledge' (*A*, 560)), a fact which allows him to entertain the possibility of infinite existence in the face of science's determination to prove secular man finite, a mere laboratory brain.

'Magnificent waste', as James describes it, is what is left over of 'one's visionary and speculative and emotional activity' once those elements which have had even the most 'traceably indirect bearing' on our actions have been subtracted (222). This glorious sense of excess, of potential

not necessarily directed *at* anything, defines the possibility of an afterlife. Finally, James suggests, it is in the performance of 'beautiful things' in the context of a *communal* and not isolated experience that we are able to become emancipated from the shackles of the present: 'The truth is that to live, to this tune, intellectually, and in order to do beautiful things, with questions of being as such questions may for the man of imagination aboundingly come up, is to find one's view of one's share in it, and above all of its appeal to *be* shared, in an infinite variety, enormously enlarged' (224). 'Magnificent waste' then is something to be experienced with others, to the extent that as a result not only does one find one's own place in the 'infinite variety' on offer, one is also potentially changed, 'enlarged' by the process. As Beverly Haviland has recently noted, 'one's very self may be consumed and dispersed in an act of imagination that takes one far beyond the limits of the actual'.²⁷ This is a liberating conclusion, for it enables James to assert that 'even should one cease to be in love with life it would be difficult, on such terms, not to be in love with living' (222). If our experience of living points us in the direction of an on-going and expansive consciousness, why should we assume that it will cease at the moment of physical death? This question of consciousness's regenerative quality is expressed again in a famous letter James wrote to Henry Adams following publication of *Notes of a Son and Brother*. Adams had read James's volume with growing pessimism, writing in March 1914 to his friend Elizabeth Cameron that 'Poor Henry James thinks it all real, I believe, and actually still lives in that dreamy, stuffy Newport and Cambridge, with papa James and Charles Norton'.²⁸ James's reply to a now lost letter from Adams, one presumably in the same vein, is a concentrated statement of his artistic belief, reiterating a faith in the vitality and significance of consciousness as a defining characteristic of human existence:

You see I still, in presence of life (or of what you deny to be such), have reactions – as many as possible – and the book I sent you is a proof of them. It's, I suppose, because I am that queer monster the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility. Hence the reactions – appearances, memories, many things go on playing upon it with consequences that I note and 'enjoy' (grim word!) noting. (Letters, IV, 706)

Faced with the infinite variety of life in all its 'splendid waste' (as he chooses to describe it in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*), James, it seems, simply cannot help himself. The excess allows for the 'sublime economy of art' which 'rescues' and 'saves' (*EWP*, I, 139), such that, in his letter to Adams, James is 'still' besieged by impressions which 'go on' affecting his consciousness, as if without any prompting from him.

In that volume by James which Adams so failed to appreciate, the author describes himself as being 'actively inert in his own behalf' (*A*, 336),

a phrase perfectly expressive of the combination of physical stasis and mental agility. He practises, we are told, a blankness which is 'inclusively blank . . . rather than poorly, and meanly, and emptily' blank (*A*, 234). In recollecting his younger self's visit to Sing-Sing prison in the company of his cousin Gus Barker, James muses on the nature of his feelings of envy towards his 'little red-headed kinsman' (*A*, 99), on the fact that 'I seem to have been constantly eager to exchange my lot for that of somebody else, on the assumed certainty of gaining in the bargain.' In admitting this James is eager not to misrepresent his emotion as jealousy, something which for him, significantly, 'bears . . . on what one sees one's companions able to *do*' (my italics). His envy takes the form of 'an acuity of perception of alternatives', an aesthetic curiosity at the possibility of inhabiting the consciousnesses of others (*A*, 101). What James so admired in Balzac, namely his skill at 'transmigration' (*EWP*, 115), his ability to 'get into the constituted consciousness, into all the clothes, gloves and whatever else, into the very skin and bones, of the habited, featured, colored, articulated forms of life that he desired to present' (*EWP*, 132), this quality is the imaginative facility which James remembers his young self wishing for, and the source of his envy.

As Ross Posnock noticed, qualities customarily held to compromise the integrity of the self are deliberately (even perversely) celebrated by James. Indeed in the writing of this autobiography the very assumption of an essential, organic self is what James is seeking to undermine. By effectively revising conventional attitudes to such notions as blankness, vagueness and envy, he attempts to locate himself at some distance from the reigning values of an increasingly aggressive and ambitiously accumulative society. 'By defamiliarizing . . . concepts . . . which usually signify negation, sterility, and poverty', Posnock observes, 'James releases their stored-up energy, which was hitherto repressed as terms of opprobrium in the culture.'²⁹ For the unconventional self of the dawdling observer, the redefinition of these conventionally pejorative and limiting values opens up enlarged possibilities of perception and experiential enquiry. Recalling in *The Middle Years* (1917), the posthumously published and uncompleted third part of his autobiographical project, his first protracted visit to London, James writes of his sheer enjoyment at being 'in the midst of . . . perversities, idiosyncrasies, incalculabilities, delightful all as densities at first insoluble, delightful even, indeed, as so much mere bewilderment and shock'. An openness to this kind of potentially disorienting atmosphere induced, we are told, sensations of excitement and danger, a heightening of consciousness in which James's provoked feelings would 'melt more or less immediately into some succulence for the mind'. A London breakfast 'disconnected' the writer from all that was familiar, 'all that I had left on the other side of the sea'. The deliberate,

'delightful' challenging of the expected, the obdurate desire to place oneself in the flow of the unfamiliar and potentially embarrassing, 'was above all what I had come out for, and every appearance that might help it was to be artfully and gratefully cultivated' (*A*, 558–9). Selfhood becomes highly contingent and enjoyably precarious, inseparable from the process of experiential inquiry and interpretation; as James notes in his preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, 'it seems probable that if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us'. Without bewilderment, he continues,

we should partake of the superior nature of the all-knowing immortals whose annals are dreadfully dull so long as flurried humans are not, for the positive relief of bored Olympians, mixed up with them. Therefore it is that the wary reader for the most part warns the novelist against making his characters too *interpretative* of the muddle of fate, or in other words too divinely, too priggishly clever. (*EWP*, 1090)

As I will show, 'novelist' here can just as easily be substituted with 'autobiographer', for the interpretative powers of that archetypal Jamesian creation, Henry James himself, are at significant moments clouded in a deliberate yet enticing cloud of obscurity.

II

James Senior's command to his children to 'Convert, convert, convert!' (*A*, 123), to take the bare facts of existence and create with them a life expressive of a deeper significance, succinctly summarises Henry James's autobiographical project. Both father and son were aware of the potentially liberating effect of illustration. For the future novelist, whose 'face was turned from the first to the idea of representation – that of the gain of charm, interest, mystery, dignity, distinction, gain of importance in fine, on the part of the represented thing' (*A*, 149–50), the possibility of the play of imagination on 'the very home of the literal' (*A*, 124) was irresistible; in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, James declares that 'the fatal futility of Fact' could be overcome in the 'richer soil' of artistic creation (*EWP*, 1140). Henry's fascination with and eager consumption of the scenic arts is extensively revealed in his recollections of hours spent at the theatre and art galleries in both America and Europe. James Senior's passion for theatre and art was pursued as part of his celebration of the unorthodox and spontaneous aesthetic sensibility. Aesthetic activity was also linked with the sacrament, in which, as Wendy Graham has described it, 'the artist consecrates the work of his hands by casting off the shackles of convention in pursuit of an ideal that will bring him closer to a spiritual reunion with God'.³⁰ The creation of art is an inclusive and democratic

process, 'man's characteristic activity', writes the elder James, one which 'excludes from its field neither the saint nor the sinner, neither serpent nor dove, but perfectly authenticates the aspiration of both'.³¹ In an article in the *Harbinger* newspaper, house journal of the utopian Brook Farm Association, he writes despairingly of the clergyman who 'stifles alike the voice of natural desire, and the inspirations of spiritual attraction, in the sole obedience of duty or social obligation'. He laments a state of affairs in which a 'taste for the opera would be thought very inconsistent with [the clergyman's] calling, and a visit to the Theatre would be tantamount to professional suicide'. In a footnote to the same article James Senior relates an anecdote about his encounter with an orthodox clergyman in Paris 'a few years since' who felt liberated by the sensual delights offered by the city: 'He had an eye for spectacle, and very decided gastronomie [*sic*] tendencies, and the way he would cut about from cafe to restaurant, with the nicest relish of the distinctive merits of each . . . was really marvellous and beautiful in one whose individuality had been so long falsified.'³² As *The Ambassadors* illustrates, with the ascetic life and its narrow focus left behind, Paris offers a more hospitable vista for one already in possession of 'an eye for spectacle'.

The preference for the freedom offered by an aesthetic conversion of fact over the restrictions of the literal is a strategy which both Henry James and his father employed in their respective autobiographical writings. The desire to convey an impression of significance, for which a mere chronicling of events would prove inadequate, is evident in James Senior's fragment of autobiography, written as a result of urging by his children and published posthumously by William in 1884. That James Senior chooses to adopt the narrative technique of a persona, Stephen Dewhurst, a fictitious friend who allegedly gave the elder James his letters requesting him to transform them into a book, immediately emphasises the extent to which the reader is unable to assume a transparent communication of the 'facts' of the past. Dewhurst enables James Senior to conceal biographical information in order to promote spiritual meaning.³³ In an earlier, unpublished autobiographical piece, 'Essay on Seminary Days', James Senior had disguised his story (or 'the little Iliad of my private bosom', as he described it) as a series of letters to his former Princeton Theological Seminary classmate Parke Godwin; but the representative significance of the autobiographical act was nevertheless made explicit. Godwin's earlier requests for James Senior's life story had apparently been denied. Now its teller finally felt ready to 'hold the *clinique* you then demanded, and give you my own mental or rather sentimental autopsy, in order that you, having before you in miniature form the science of the evil, as I at least understood it, may without difficulty apply it yourself to the large personality of civilized mankind'.³⁴ William James's words

in a letter of 1885, comparing his father to Thomas Carlyle, are pertinent here. Whereas both men flouted 'reasoning', regarding it as 'only an unfortunate necessity of exposition', James Senior 'had nothing to correspond to Carlyle's insatiable learning of historic facts and memory'.³⁵ Fact, for William's father, could be put to one side in favour of philosophical exemplification. Indeed the first words of his posthumously published sketch proudly declare an aversion to identifiable chronology: 'I will not attempt to state the year in which I was born, because it is not a fact embraced in my own knowledge.' What is important for Dewhurst is the birth of his 'historic consciousness', the genesis of his own sense of identity. This can be dated, he writes, from his presence at the celebrations in March 1815 – James Senior was three months off his fourth birthday at this date – marking the signing of the Treaty of Ghent to conclude the 1812 war with Britain. His memory of the event is focused on a specific and insistent pair of opposing images: 'The only impression left by the illumination upon my imagination was the contrast of the awful dark of the sky with the feeble glitter of the streets; as if the animus of the display had been, not to eclipse the darkness, but to make it visible.' The conquering of the 'feeble glitter' by the 'awful dark' (with the conscious Miltonic allusion to 'darkness visible') points to the presence of a spiritual struggle which the author would wish us to believe was felt even at this early age, a struggle which we are meant to understand as an allegorisation of the human condition. These hints are made explicit when Dewhurst chooses to interpret his experience as being 'rather emblematic of the intellect', emblematic in the sense that 'its earliest sensible foundations should thus be laid in "a horror of great darkness"'.³⁶ The sketch is not intended simply as a memoir. It insists on being read as a religious parable expressing what James Senior believed to be the liberating truths of his own brand of Swedenborgianism. In Stephen Dewhurst, the elderly James Senior envisages an idealised *alter ego* reflected back into his youth, a spiritually whole self who, despite similarities in education and background, had reached a state of maturity at a much earlier stage in his life than had his creator. In the preface to the fragment, James Senior as 'editor' comments that 'It costs me nothing to admit that my friend, both intellectually and morally, was of a more robust make than me.' He is 'astonished' and 'disconcerted' by the 'cosmopolitan ease and affability . . . in all the range of his religious conscience'. Whereas James Senior had 'almost no suspicion of the spiritual or interior contents of Revelation', Dewhurst was 'insensible to the pretension of a distinctly moral righteousness'.³⁷

James Senior's theology was inextricably connected to his personal history, to the extent that his autobiography was deliberately aestheticised to highlight spiritual meaning. In an article in the *Harbinger* from 1848 he

writes that 'It is true the old theologians will tell you that they derive their views of the divine character and of human destiny from revelation, but it is none the less true that *every one's perception of revelation is exactly moulded upon his experience of life*' (my emphasis).³⁸ The 'vastation' episode at Windsor in 1844, James Senior's pivotal moment of psychic breakdown, provides him with further material to transform so that the empirical facts of the incident become almost irrelevant compared to its spiritual reality. The writing is of such a vividness that the story deserves to be quoted at some length:

In the spring of 1844 I was living with my family in the neighborhood of Windsor, England, much absorbed in the study of the Scriptures. Two or three years before this period I had made an important discovery, as I fancied, namely: that the book of Genesis was not intended to throw a direct light upon our natural or race history, but was an altogether mystical or symbolic record of the laws of God's *spiritual* creation and providence . . . During my residence abroad . . . I hoped to be finally qualified to contribute a not insignificant mite to the sum of man's highest knowledge . . .

One day, however, towards the close of May, having eaten a comfortable dinner, I remained sitting at the table after the family had dispersed, idly gazing at the embers in the grate, thinking of nothing, and feeling only the exhilaration incident to a good digestion, when suddenly – in a lightning-flash as it were – 'fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake.' To all appearance it was a perfectly insane and abject terror, without ostensible cause, and only to be accounted for, to my perplexed imagination, by some damnèd shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room, and raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life. The thing had not lasted ten seconds before I felt myself a wreck, that is, reduced from a state of firm, vigorous, joyful manhood to one of almost helpless infancy. The only self-control I was capable of exerting was to keep my seat. I felt the greatest desire to run incontinently to the foot of the stairs and shout for help to my wife, – to run to the roadside even, and appeal to the public to protect me; but by an immense effort I controlled these frenzied impulses, and determined not to budge from my chair till I had recovered my lost self-possession.³⁹

James Senior at the beginning of this passage is a successful man by his own standards. In apparent rude health, enjoying the beauty of the Windsor location (which 'furnished us a constant temptation to long walks and drives' (44)), he is confident too in his intellectual abilities – certain that his investigations into the biblical Genesis story will warrant him a place amongst those who have added to 'man's highest knowledge'. The unsettling confrontation which he experiences with this ill-defined form (it is '*some damnèd shape*') is transfigured into something archetypal of the experience of discarding selfhood, 'that which keeps our manhood so little and so depraved' (47). As a result his studious theological labours

are abandoned as worthless and self-serving: 'I had never really wished the truth, but only to ventilate my own ability in discovering it. I was getting sick to death in fact with a sense of my downright intellectual poverty and dishonesty' (48–9).

Howard Feinstein has demonstrated the extent to which James Senior seems to be borrowing from other sources in his retelling of this event, most especially from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* but also from Swedenborg and the Bible.⁴⁰ The reference to 'fear and trembling' (Job 4:14), a biblical example of a mystical experience in which what is revealed is man's inability to understand God's ways, serves to introduce James Senior's own instance of punctured hubris and radical incomprehension. There is also an intriguing, although probably unknowing, echo of Søren Kierkegaard's 1843 meditation on the Abraham and Isaac story of the same name, like James Senior's account, a narrative of renunciation of conventional values for the sake of moral and spiritual innovation.⁴¹ What is worth remembering is that this most extensive treatment of the Windsor experience was not published until 1879, three years before its author's death. By this time it had become imbued with an archetypal trajectory and serves not so much (even if at all) as a document of historical event than as a testimony of a well-rehearsed spiritual position. As Feinstein observes, 'The sequence of James's story is Bunyan in microcosm: reading the Bible, being cast into despair, hiding the matter from his family, and then telling them the awful truth that launches him on his solitary quest for the Heavenly City.'⁴² For the purposes of his religious parable James Senior must locate the genesis of his spiritual journey at the point where he first encounters the writings of Swedenborg. Where numerous doctors and expensive water cures have failed, his eager perusal of *Divine Love and Wisdom* and *Divine Providence* initiates a healing process. The enigmatic Mrs Chichester (a figure identified by Henry James in *Notes of a Son and Brother* (A, 340)) introduces him to the idea of vastation as an explanation for what he has experienced. Her pupil is duly grateful: 'In expressing my thanks for her encouraging words, I remarked that I was not at all familiar with the Swedenborgian technics, and that I should be extremely happy if she would follow up her flattering judgement of my condition by turning into plain English the contents of the very handsome Latin word she had used.'⁴³ Within the rules of the narrative, a profession of ignorance is necessary if Swedenborg is to act as James Senior's saviour in his hour of need. This proves to be the case:

I read from the first with palpitating interest. My heart divined, even before my intelligence was prepared to do justice to the books, the unequalled amount of truth to be found in them. Imagine a fever patient, sufficiently restored of his malady to be able to think of something beside himself, suddenly transported

where the free airs of heaven blow upon him, and the sound of running waters refreshes his jaded senses; and you have a feeble image of my delight in reading.⁴⁴

But as Feinstein has noted, there is ample reason to suggest that this was by no means James Senior's first encounter with Swedenborg's ideas. Certainly he had already struck up an acquaintance with the London Swedenborgian James Garth Wilkinson before his Windsor experience. Wilkinson had written to him three months prior to it, in February 1844, affirming his belief in one of the central tenets of Swedenborg's philosophy, that of the doctrine of correspondence, whereby humankind is to be encouraged 'to cultivate a finer sense, and to receive it as a settled truth that there is ever something more in nature than the order first presented to the senses'. In the same letter Wilkinson had enthused about the establishment of the Swedenborg Association, and encouraged James Senior to anticipate, 'by the blessing of Divine Providence', his promotion to a 'station of use, either as an Author, or as an oral teacher'.⁴⁵ And one further piece of evidence can be marshalled to question James Senior's apparent ignorance of Swedenborg prior to Mrs Chichester's ministrations. In a letter of 1843 written to Joseph Henry, his former science teacher and now a professor of natural philosophy at Princeton University, James Senior outlines a philosophical conviction that can be said to anticipate that described in Wilkinson's later communication. 'Again and again,' he writes, 'I am forced by scriptural philosophy to the conviction that all the phenomena of physics are to [be] explained and grouped under laws exclusively spiritual – that they are in fact only the material expression of spiritual truth.'⁴⁶ Joseph Henry's reply would have done nothing to deter the direction of his former pupil's thinking, affirming his belief that 'all the phenomena of the external universe and perhaps all those of the spiritual [are] reduced to the operation of a simple law of the Divine Will . . . I believe that every phenomena is connected with every other' (388).

It is likely, then, that James Senior was at least already receptive to certain ideas and influences which would have led him to espouse more readily those of the Swedish thinker. Moreover in writing his own account James Senior was attempting to create a close link between *his* biography and that of Swedenborg. Wilkinson's life of Swedenborg had appeared in 1849, and it is surely not coincidental that James Senior's vastation is strongly identified with his friend's account of one of the series of experiences that Swedenborg claimed for his own crisis-filled years of 1743, 1744 and 1745. Like James Senior, Swedenborg is dining in his room, labouring on a philosophical study from which his revelations would relieve him: 'Towards the end of the meal I remarked that a kind of mist spread before my eyes, and I saw the floor of my room covered with