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Richard Anker

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Irony and the Question of Presentation in *The American Scene*

Richard ANKER
Université Clermont Auvergne

Résumé : l'article tente de dégager de *The American Scene* une expérience de présentation esthétique (*Darstellung*) en tant qu'expérience obsédante sinon principielle du texte. Il commence par problématiser la question de l'« œil » jamesien, en faisant un bref détour hors du mémoire de voyage et en marquant une certaine distance vis-à-vis des lectures pragmatistes, historicistes et politico-culturelles de cette œuvre de James. Plusieurs scénarios de *The American Scene* sont évoqués afin de souligner le caractère irréconciliable des dimensions performatives et constatives, tropologiques et spéculaires du langage en tant que médium de présentation, lequel rend impossible toute tentative de réduire le texte à un document historico-politique, et qui sous-tend au contraire le caractère ironique du discours. Le scénario présentatif qui se déroule à Harvard Hall au premier chapitre du livre est examiné plus en détail afin de dégager du texte une toute autre force critique, toute autre que celles qui feraient trop facilement abstraction du texte en le réduisant par diverses manières à son contexte politico-culturel ou historique. Force critique susceptible de se présenter en tant que contre-force à l'idéologie esthétique que James voit s'installer aux Etats-Unis comme ce qu'il appelle le « hotel spirit », mode spectaculaire et nihiliste de l'esprit américain.

Mots clés : Henry James, *The American Scene*, ironie, présentation (*Darstellung*), tropologie, finitude, histoire, spectacle, liberté.

I. Brooding

Henry James never suffered the illusion of pure perception. In *The American Scene*, one of his most overtly referential works, he employed the phrase “naked eye” only between quotation marks (190-191). Since all the ways of *not* reading *The American Scene* seem to turn around a compulsion either to ignore what James, back in his earliest days as a writer, called the “fatal obliquity of vision” (1975 47) or to devise “theoretical” (ideological) strategies for getting around it, getting back to the naked eye (empirical reality) through variously contrived conceptions of mediated immediacy – “theatrical,” “performative,” “pragmatist” –, it seems a good idea to begin by focusing attention on the painter’s eye. Doing so also has the advantage of enabling me to set the stage for my treatment further on of a key scenario in *The American Scene*, the presentation that unfolds in Harvard Hall of Sargent’s portrait of Major Henry Lee Higginson, in the book’s first chapter. Sargent, I shall argue, whose “faculty of brooding reflection” James admired (1989 227), is the specular double of the brooding tourist of *The American Scene* – or, with a slight yet significant adjustment of the rotating mirror, for there always is one, of the author himself – and the portrait of Higginson a reflective image of James’s text. Perhaps none of that can be clear to us, however, if we have not first problematized the question of the eye, that of the painter, not as a singular, aestheticizing variation upon a supposedly neutral or “naked” act of seeing, of course, but as the artistic reduction to the (groundless) grounds of seeing, which, in the final analysis, are nothing other than what I have just called “text.”

Of course, abstracting the eye from the “scene,” whether it be in the theatrical sense that the term possesses in a novel like *The Tragic Muse*, for example – where the scenic performance of Miriam Rooth constitutes the specular basis of the artistic faculty of the portraitist, Nick Dormer – or in the metaphorical sense that the term most often possesses in *The American Scene*, is a somewhat risky affair, and, for the purposes of my reading, a wholly provisional one. It is risky because it involves a regression from appearance, from the “object” of perception, to what in Kant is called the “formal” condition of appearance, which, as the philosopher points out, is nothing in itself, has no substance.¹ Yet this nothing is not a pure privation either, a *nihil negativum*, but – I borrow here from Gerard Granel’s reading of Kant (79) – a *nihil positivum*. What is a *nihil positivum*? Here, happily perhaps, we can turn to James, a “formalist” as everyone knows, who did not have to (mis)read Kant, it appears, to postulate that the “Ding an sich” is not an object, nor a concept for that matter, but a form. Or, better perhaps, a figure. Abstracting the eye provisionally then from the scene in a regression that also informs Kant’s critical philosophy, not to mention the later attempts by Husserl to uncover the transcendental conditions of consciousness, we can observe the *nihil positivum* present itself in the intensely self-reflexive vision of Nick Dormer, the portraitist of *The Tragic Muse*, as, indeed, the “thing in itself,” qualified by James, not for lack of a better term of course but for lack of an authentically *positive* one, as possessing a certain “mystic value.” Dormer’s brooding reflection, as he “yearns over” this insubstantial figure on which his artistic vocation depends – on which, in other words, the faculty of seeing depends –, must be quoted here in full. It is late in the novel, the genetic process that informs its narrative structure and Dormer’s artistic becoming within it is near accomplishment, and Miriam Rooth, the actress whose “productive force” reflects that of the portraitist himself, and will thereby ultimately figure it for him more effectively than the dim figure in this intensely self-reflective scenario can, has just departed from one of her sittings for him:

It occurred to him [Nick Dormer] that there were deep differences in the famous artistic life. Miriam was already in a glow of glory – which moreover was probably but a faint spark in relation to the blaze to come; and as he closed the door on her and took up his palette to rub it with a dirty cloth the little room in which his own battle was practically to be fought looked woefully cold and grey and mean. It was lonely and yet at the same time was peopled with unfriendly shadows – so thick he foresaw them gather in winter twilights to come – the duller conditions, the longer patiences, the less immediate and less personal joys. His late beginning was there and his wasted youth, the mistakes that would still bring forth children after their image, the sedentary solitude, the grey mediocrity, the poor explanations, the effect of foolishness he dreaded even from afar off in having to ask people to wait, and wait longer, and wait again, for a fruition which to their sense at least might well prove a grotesque anti-climax. He yearned enough over it, however it should figure, to feel that this possible pertinacity might enter into comparison even with such a productive force as Miriam’s. That was after all in his bare studio the most collective dim presence, the one that kept him company best as he sat there and that made it the right place however wrong – the sense that it was to the thing in itself which he was attached. This was Miriam’s case too, but the sharp contrast, which she showed him she also felt, was in the number of other things she got with the thing in itself.

I hasten to add that our young man had hours when this last mystic value struck him as requiring for its full operation no adjunct whatever – as being in its own splendor a summary of all adjuncts and apologies. (1995 462)

¹ Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “The mere form of intuition, without substance, is in itself not an object, but the merely formal condition of one (as appearance), like pure space and pure time, which are to be sure something, as the forms for intuiting, but are not in themselves objects that are intuited (*ens imaginarium*).” (382)

Hardly dramatic stuff, as James was forced to acknowledge in his preface in discussing the thanklessness of artistically presenting the artist's presentative faculty (he would not try it again in novelistic form until the aborted *The Sense of the Past*), that is his "productive force." The "only honors" of the "preference for art," James writes in the preface, are those of "contraction, concentration and a seemingly deplorable indifference to everything but itself," a preference which, from an empirical perspective, he goes on to point out, "can only appear as a marked instance of somebody's willingness to pass mainly for an ass." (1984 1106)² In our age of cultural studies and "new" historicism Dormer has indeed passed mainly for an ass (Rowe, Blair), while previously, in intrinsic-formalist approaches to the text, a certain ambiguity *inherent* to his accomplishment as a portraitist was consistently interpreted as an ambiguity *with respect* to that accomplishment (Edel, Powers, Krook), taking the "preference for art" more seriously than it nowadays appears respectable to do but failing nonetheless to recognize the essentially ambiguous or equivocal nature of artistic vision in James. Nowhere in the novel is this essential ambiguity more evident than in this little scenario, where what presents itself is not an object of presentation but rather, however dimly it "figures," and it is "dim" indeed, the formal conditions of presentative experience itself, that is, the whole shadowy, impersonal structure of the artistic life as it is both "foreseen" and recollected in accordance with the genetic principle that determines both Dormer's vocation as an artist and the narrative representation of it in the novel. Representation in James is never the imitation of a transcendental order, as in the Platonist model, but part of a chain of being on its way to its teleological end, a process revealed in a "flash," one will recall, in the famous nightmare that unfolds in the Galérie d'Apollon. The same genetic process that is revealed in the nightmare underwrites the narrative structure of *The Tragic Muse*, as is self-reflexively glimpsed here by Nick Dormer, the artistic reflector of the novel, in language no less exalted than that employed by James in his autobiography: "thing in itself," "last mystic value [...]" requiring for its full operation no adjunct whatever," "being in its own splendor a summary of all adjuncts and apologies," etc. The difference between the two scenarios is the difference between a subject still plunged in the becoming of his destiny and just scarcely able to make out its contours, on one hand, and a subject which has surmounted the teleological movement of his becoming by awakening from it, on the other, an "awakening" which retrospectively rounds the genetic process off into a graspable whole separate from the no-longer captive subject. The fact that Dormer (a homonym of course of *dormeur*, meaning "sleeper" in French) is still immersed in the process which underwrites his own artistic becoming makes the glimpse he catches of it all the more impressive, and ought to make the reader aware of the self-reflexive capacity of this character's artistic consciousness.

That is not all, however, that Dormer proves capable of seeing and which is essential for us to see if we wish to understand seeing in James. The subject of the nightmare awakens, one will recall, from his sleep within his sleep to pursue the "visitant" responsible for his awakening down the corridor of the Galérie d'Apollon, the "dimly descried figure" ultimately exceeding the genetic process it had put into motion and withdrawing from the totalizing cognition of the dreamer's "immense hallucination." In a structurally analogous manner, Gabriel Nash, the specular figure on which Dormer's own "beginning" depends – as a careful reading of their encounter in the first chapter of the novel could reveal –, a figure that is

² James returns later in the preface to what he recognizes as the near impossibility of presenting artistic success – not failure, or mere amateurism, another thing – in a dramatically effective manner: "I strove in vain, I feel, to embroil and adorn this young man on whom a hundred ingenious touches are thus lavished: he has insisted in the event on looking as simple and flat as some brass check or engraved number, the symbol and guarantee of a stored treasure. The better part of him is locked too far away from us, and the part we see has to pass for – well, what it passes for, so lamentedly, among his friends and relatives." (1118) In short, Dormer is to be interpreted as a *sign* of artistic achievement, readable of course as such, but invisible from the merely empirical perspective of readers and other characters.

moreover described late in the narrative “visitant,” and a “ghostly” one to boot, eludes the representational faculty of his friend and, as we read, “steer[s] his course straight through the eventual narrow pass and go[es] down over the horizon” (1995 470). In both the nightmare and the novel, a figural excess, irreducible to cognition, conspicuously withdraws from the genetic process that is initiated by the subject’s encounter with it.³ No less admirable than Dormer’s “so thoroughly inward” (1984 1106) glimpse of the “productive force” on which his artistic vocation depends, as we saw previously, is his recognition of the *excess* of this force in his final encounter with Nash: “You’ll ‘slope,’ my dear fellow, – you’ll quietly slope; and it will be all right and inevitable, though I shall miss you greatly at first” (1995 471). Like the nautical imagery of “going down over the horizon,” what the word “slope” suggests is a tropological drift or deviation that exceeds the totalizing cognition of artistic self-reflection, an excess that is figuratively presented in the nightmare and dramatically represented in the equivocal and ultimately ghostly character of Gabriel Nash in the novel. What all this reveals is that the *nihil positivum* is divided, split. The genetic structure of the presentative experience, of the productive force as an autotelic unity having within itself its own origin and its own end (“requiring for its full operation no adjunct whatever”), does not succeed after all in reconciling its telos with its origin. The genetic structure of consciousness reveals itself as traversed by a tropological force which exceeds it, and which presents itself in the text not in the form of a mere contradiction which might be overcome at an ulterior stage of the genetic process, but as the presentation of the limit of presentation, of presentative (or representative) experience itself. Far from dissimulating this split or this discontinuity which underwrites all cognitive experience, James thematizes it in dramatic terms. The same tropological excess, eluding the genetic structure of cognition, is precisely what reveals itself to Dormer in his late “revelation” of Nash: “It struck our young man that he had never *seen* his subject before, and yet somehow this revelation was not produced by the sense of actually seeing it.” (1995 474) Between the genetic structure of cognition and the tropological principle which exceeds it, or, more precisely, traversing this structure as its true origin and its true end, appears an irreducible disjunction which James repeatedly and insistently brings to the reader’s attention. There is nothing more equivocal in *The Tragic Muse*, nor in James’s work as a whole, than what we might call a duplicitous allegiance to these two irreducibly opposed figural economies, one specular and genetic in structure, the other tropological. This is true not only for James’s fictional writings but also for *The American Scene*.

It would not be saying much to say that since the advent of cultural studies and the “repositioning,” in the marketing sense of the term (Posnock, 1999 273), of *The American Scene* as a central work in James’s oeuvre little serious attention has been paid to the question of form. Academic winds have been blowing in another direction for some time. Recent cultural analysts and new historicists have occasionally been critical of work from older schools of thematic criticism, works that take James’s apparently harsh comments on the “alienism” of the Jews he encounters in New York, for example, too literally or at face value, and promoted reading practices which privilege a more complex relationship between text and context, and theatrical or performative notions of the writer’s self that appear to problematize the former self of Cartesian autonomy, but much in these productions suggests that ideological motivations for reading not only die hard but have acquired new purpose. The motivations themselves change, of course, but not the ideological impulse itself. By “ideological” I do not mean the endeavor to uncover a critical force that a literary text like *The American Scene* may possess, nor the attempt to understand and to define its historicity, but the compulsion to believe that formal and thematic, performative and constative, or in the

³ For an analysis of *The Tragic Muse*, which I can scarcely adumbrate here, see my *Henry James. Le Principe spectral de la représentation* (33-160).

terms of the duplicity just presented, tropological and specular functions of the text can fuse or harmonize synthetically as a basis for viable readings. Such an ideological manner of reading is precisely what Ross Posnock proposes when he claims to uncover in *The American Scene* “a pragmatism that turns aesthetics from contemplation to action that cuts against the grain of capitalist efficiency and utility,” and goes on to affirm that this pragmatist tradition he finds enacted in James “resolves the obdurate conflict between aesthetics and politics.” (1999 277) Such efforts to reconcile aesthetics and politics, in other words to transform aesthetics from a solely contemplative or reflective category into an active and purposeful one (a gesture typical of pragmatism), are of course as old as the hills, going back in modern literary-critical memory to Schiller’s attempt to appropriate Kant in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Such ideological endeavors most often of course appear with laudable intentions, and Posnock’s aim of divulging a critical force in James’s text that could be an effective counter to the capitalist mode of discipline and management of the American spirit is certainly admirable. His contextualization of the text makes *The Trial of Curiosity* a richly informative document that is indispensable to all historically minded readers of *The American Scene*. But his conception of Jamesian curiosity as a form of mimetic receptivity that “imitates” the object rather than “subsuming” it (Posnock, 1991 142), that conditions a self that is responsive to indeterminacy and the contingencies of history in the place of a monadic self invested in property and the grounds of its autonomy, is based on an overly restrictive conception of mimesis (one which maintains in an unproblematic manner that there *is* such a thing as an “object” prior to its mimetic presentation) and fails to take into account the genetic structure of representation in James’s writing. One has difficulty speaking of Sara Blair’s ideological interpretation of James with the same eagerness to point out its qualities and to find some degree of critical complicity. Immediately preceding her chapter on *The American Scene* in her *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* appears a chapter devoted to *The Tragic Muse*, hardly surprising given the tropes of racial and national identity that are at work in the novel, in which the reader is informed that in order for its aesthetic program of Anglo-Saxon “nation-building” to be sustained the novel “must make Gabriel Nash disappear,” indeed write him out as a ghost, due to the dangerous exposure of a “low” form of cosmopolitanism this character represents and that James wishes to recuperate in his novelistic “revision of genteel cultural politics.” (154-155) Blair’s ideological blindness to the formal structure and to the tropological deviation of the text, a deviation I alluded to previously, does not limit itself to her politically determined interpretation of Nash’s disappearance, although that blindness reaches perhaps an interpretive climax when she informs us, quoting sympathetically Joseph Litvak, that Nash’s disappearance “represents an ‘extreme,’ if not ‘terroristic,’ instance of James’s ‘counterplotting’” against this character in order to sustain his genteel nation-building agenda. Miriam Ro[oth], the Jewish actress and “structural center,” as James puts it (1984 1108), of the novel, must also be white-washed as Blair sees it in order for the novel’s “racial logic” (157) to cohere, “transfigured from *cabotine* to ‘productive force’” in a mere clean-up act designed to attenuate and disguise the real threat of the character’s “contestatory power” as “woman and Jew” (153). In fact, this productive force designates a sacrificial “turning” of the tropological deviation that Miriam’s Jewishness represents into a framed and delimited mode of theatrical performance constituting the specular basis of perception in James, a “tragic” severing of mimetic alterity that is the condition of possibility of cognition itself (which is why Nash’s tropological deviation, spurning this sacrifice, appears as “ghostly” in the eyes of the portraitist at the end of the novel), something of much deeper and vaster aesthetic and political consequences than Blair appears to suspect in her short-sighted interpretation, or occultation rather, of the text’s

“central” tropological event.⁴ If Blair’s interpretation teaches us anything it is that racial and ethnic tropes must be read in accordance with the tropological structure of the text, indeed to the very limits of that structure and beyond its formal closure as a mimetological system, as the author himself in this case reads them (and as Dormer “sees” them), not as “performative documents” (the key aesthetico-political oxymoron of her book) endowed with a merely provisionally mediated referential function. All of this is directly related to the critic’s reading of *The American Scene* because it is against the background of the racial logic deduced here that Blair construes her misguided notion of a “conversion” that would have taken place in James, a conversion from the genteel nation-builder who must reject the “unstable alterity” (154) that Jewish and low cosmopolitan figures like Miriam Ro[o]th and Gabriel Nash represent to the “documentary observer” (her naked-eye stand-in for the brooding analyst) who “cannily represents” a “theatre of nation-building” where “alien forces participate in the making of a distinctly American race.” (163) Blind to the tropological excess of James’s texts due to a compulsion to foreclose its play within a conservative notion of performative language and theatricality (the fruit it appears of what the critic calls her “post-deconstructive, ‘new’ historicist” training” [212]), Blair can only conceive what she sees as James’s openness to Jewish “phantasmagoria” as being the result of his empirical encounter with ethnic otherness, that figured by the Jewish immigrants in the lower East Side of New York.

Critics who incorporate what they appear to think is a sufficient dose of “deconstructive” or of “performative” interpretive practice to further claims of a newly fashioned reconciliation of the political and the aesthetic, of the documentary and the performative, are enacting a compulsion which would not be worth commenting on were it not in all likelihood inescapable. The closing words of Blair’s book warn us of the interpretive risk of “premature foreclosure” that her own reading seeks to prevent (214), and even if, as I have suggested, her reading tightens the screw considerably in its ideological reduction of the text to selected cultural signifieds, the question remains open as to what a foreclosure that was not premature might be. This supposes that foreclosure of some kind is necessary, that reading is an act that inevitably produces meaning as the reconciliation of the signifier and the signified, form and content, tropes or figures and referential elements of a historical, cultural or political nature. The same is true at the level of cognition itself, which must ultimately be conceived as an act of reading, as James’s work constantly teaches or reminds us. Despite his deep skepticism about the possibility of “unprejudiced” vision, as the author puts it in the same youthful letter to Sargeant Perry I alluded to earlier, a skepticism that he almost cruelly, as it appears, was willing later in his career to employ in cold scrutiny of the desperate governess of “The Turn of the Screw” as she seeks, and murderously achieves, foreclosure of the ghostly and vertiginous spiraling of the tropological deviation (or, in her view, deviance) she is exposed to, James himself insists over and over again, in multiple guises, in various contexts, on the cognitive necessity of “mak[ing] a sense” (202),

⁴ Blair, as I have already suggested, has little interest in the complex unfolding of Dormer’s artistic vocation, grounded in a chain of tropological and mimetological substitutions which she completely ignores; the fact that Dormer fails to paint a portrait of Nash, for the reasons we are aware of, is for her the result of the painter’s ethnic chauvinism, evidence of his “fundamental inability to reinvent the [...] Anglo-Saxon character” (Blair 156). While traditional formalist readings like those offered by Lyall H. Powers and Dorothea Krook at least recognized a certain ambiguity pertaining to Dormer’s artistic achievement, and wondered about it, as I’ve already remarked, they also perceived Gabriel Nash as something of a riddle, while Blair and Rowe **tighten the screws** of their ideological interpretations to the point of effacing all ambiguity and excess in James’s text (for Rowe Nash is one of a number of “irrelevant characters” in a novel that becomes interesting only when read as a “struggle between homosocial cultural conventions of London politics and flexible gender roles of aesthetic culture” [Rowe 4]). On a certain “aesthetic religiosity” in James and the “Judeo-Christian” structure of *The Tragic Muse*, the formal and representational logic of which determines Miriam Ro[o]th’s “conversion” and her “sacrifice” as an artist, see *Henry James. Le Principe spectral de la représentation, op. cit.*, p. 97-100.

as the restless analyst of *The American Scene* emphasizes, were it only, as it often appears, as remedy to the crisis of exposure to tropological excess. The obvious fact that these crises are themselves triggered (for the restless analyst and the governess alike) by what is called “the appeal of a scene,” in other words by some remarkable site or incident in the surrounding environment that elicits a response in the form of the linguistic activity that is responsible for creating the epistemological tension that little by little becomes critical, underscores the genetic structure of the loop between origin and end, ground and figure, impression and meaning that always risks going haywire and leading to “madness” (22), to a “go[ing] to pieces” (202), instead of, or on the way to, the production of sense. The uncontrollable and endless circling that meaning’s foreclosure intends to stall, in order precisely that the process not take the form of an open-ended spiral, as in “The Turn of the Screw,” is a consequence of what James calls at one point – in a scenario that we will look at more closely further on – “an inspiration working perhaps even beyond its consciousness” (47), in other words, a tropological performativity in language that is irreducible to language’s own inescapably descriptive or constative function. The disjunction between these two linguistic functions, each of which has its claim to make on the writer – and perhaps never more so than in such an overtly referential work as *The American Scene* –, or the gap within language’s “consciousness” of itself, ruins the possibility of the text’s functioning in a reliably documentary manner.

Despite the fact that travel writing is generally seen as belonging to a simpler mode of referentiality than most literary writing, *The American Scene* is an essentially ironic text, albeit at a less threatening pitch of equivocal insight than James’s previous first-person narrative, *The Sacred Fount*. It is ironic in the sense that it reveals in every act of sense-making that its author falls victim to – for the restless analyst can no more forebear committing this act than the author’s distraught governess can – the rhetorical deviation or uncontrollability that undercuts meaning and severs cognitive awareness from itself. This ironical mode of awareness is based on the same equivocal form of cognition that James’s portraitist, Nick Dormer, proves capable of registering in his apprehension of Gabriel Nash, as we saw previously. What Dormer discerns – and it is the kind of insight that James attributes in such a direct manner only to surrogate artists like Dormer and Ralph Pendrel of *The Sense of the Past*, and more perilously to the anonymous first-person narrator of *The Sacred Fount* – is the hiatus, the disjunction between the specular and the tropological, the constative and the performative functions of language that Nash, in his ghost-like manner, figures or represents. Irony, then, in the sense I am using the term is not a mere aesthetic device (employed to achieve a playful or an elegant distance in relation to what is being said), but a paradoxical mode of allegiance to the two opposing functions of language, performative and constative.⁵ This allegiance does not lead to some higher mode of reconciliation between the two functions, as may appear to be the case in a writer less epistemologically rigorous than James, but always ends up reinforcing the evidence of their incompatibility, the disruptive nature of their encounter, as in Dormer’s bewildering “revelation” of what he cannot “see.” Or in Ralph Pendrel’s enigmatic insight: “He saw what was beyond sense.” (1917 87) To employ the trope of irony to define a mode of cognitive insight, as I am doing here, is in effect to subvert the more conventional understanding of the trope as a discursive figure used by a subject to create effects, diverting or manipulative, and to define it, provisionally at least, as an act of cognition that sees that there is no way of reconciling what it sees with the cognitive act itself, that there is a figurative excess in the making of sense. That this ironical insight cannot be reduced to sense is of course why most readers of James just ignore it. Or it is occulted, unknowingly of course, in layers of cultural or historical analysis, which, needless to say, are always part of

⁵ Gert Buelens has also pointed out what he calls “the discordant philosophical strategies” of *The American Scene* (1999 357).

much more serious hermeneutical endeavors (the regular focalization upon the presence of racial and ethnic stereotypes in *The American Scene* makes that clear enough). To qualify as I did earlier as a “double allegiance” what in fact is a double constraint, a double bind that no author can have mastery over – and James is certainly not a writer who can be accused of not trying –, is simply to suggest that his work is best read when we take into account his earnest and often dead serious attempts to maintain fidelity to the two terms of this irreconcilable opposition. Irony is a word to describe this ruptured fidelity.⁶

II. Double Allegiance and the Problem of Irony

One could profitably select scenarios from almost any of the fourteen chapters of *The American Scene* to study the double allegiance at the basis of this irony more carefully. Indeed, most of the chapters contain one scenario in which the problem of making sense is brought to the foreground and dramatized in an explicit manner, in much the same way that important specular encounters are rendered in the author’s fictional narratives. Although they are very fluidly composed, the chapters do not have indeterminate, open-ended structures as is often suggested by critics. Instead, individual chapters tend to present themselves as presentations of the genetic process underwriting reflective consciousness. More precisely, what they present is the experience of presentation – presentment, exhibition, revelation, etc.⁷ – as a specular process in which reflective consciousness establishes itself as a mediating entity between sensible reality and the intelligible idea which is the eidetic or formal condition of appearance. This condition being split, as we saw previously, in the sense that the idea always ultimately reveals itself in James to be a purely fictional entity deriving its eidetic or positing force from the rhetorical properties of language, the presentative experiences dramatized in *The American Scene* invariably unfold in a duplicitous manner, specular consciousness revealing itself as founded upon the foreclosure of a linguistic or tropological event whose uncontrollability or excess is always legible in the text.⁸

⁶ Academic readers of a “post-deconstructive” bent will already of course have assimilated Paul de Man’s famous text on irony, in the second part of “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” to which I hereby allude for the benefit of those in a “pre-deconstructive” or in perennially dawning phases of deconstructive awareness. See also de Man’s “The Concept of Irony” in *Aesthetic Ideology*. A key use of the word “irony” in James to signify a ruptured fidelity to two linguistic economies can be found in “The Jolly Corner,” with the resumption of the genetic movement of narrative after its suspension in Brydon’s moment of “Discretion.” There, the contamination of the tropological economy of the text, to which Brydon momentarily “listens” across the thin partition of the door, and the genetic economy of the narrative as it resumes, leading to the inevitable specular appearance of the double, is dramatized in these terms: “something had overtaken all ironically his sense of proportion.” (1996 720). On this, see my *Henry James. Le Principe spectral de la représentation* (180-219).

⁷ Words and expressions like “the shy spectre of a revelation” (32), “a complete revelation” (39), “the last revelation” (137), or “the whole spectacle” (13), “picture” (15, 113), “presentment of the general scene” (136), “pure presentable picture” (149), “to make it presentable” (231), “publically presentable” (245), “all its best presentability” (248), “exhibition” (219), “represent” (37), “representation” (148, 236), “representative values” (227), etc., all variations, of course, of *scene*, are legion in the text.

⁸ Presentation (*Darstellung*) presents itself as a question and enters the “scene” of philosophy in the critical philosophy of Kant, as the central question of his philosophy, as Heidegger, whose own philosophy generalizes the question considerably, recognized. Partly through Heidegger’s influence the question (often closely related to that of *mimêsis*) is inherited by Gerard Granel, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, to mention the most prominent and most radical French thinkers whose work proceeds, to a significant extent at least, from their treatment of it, each tackling the subject of presentation in extraordinarily diverse ways and bringing out different effects or repercussions related to modern art, philosophy, literature and politics, as does the writing of the poet and critic Michel Deguy. The question remains submerged in the Anglo-Saxon philosophical reception of Kant, but enters the scene in the dramatic (or scandalous) way that one is familiar with in the literary theory of Paul de Man, himself influenced by the continental philosophical tradition, and who gives it the rhetorical inflection at the basis of deconstructive studies of literature in the United States. The dossier is immense, proliferating, exceeding by far anything broached upon here; apart from the few selected

Among the more salient examples of such presentative experiences would be the “revelation of modernity” in part four of chapter four, where, strolling in Central Park in the late afternoon light – the “waning light” always being most propitious in James for the specular mode of revelation presented here –, the “presentment of the scene” occurs with an uncanny intensity of vision recalling that of the governess as she catches sight of the ghost of Peter Quint for the first time in chapter three of “The Turn of the Screw.” As in the ghost story, an extraordinary limpness in the presentation of architectural detail is corrupted by the presence of a linguistic remainder – “the detail in every frontage and cornice and architrave, in every feature of every edifice, as sharp as the uttered words of the plea I have just imagined.” (136-138)⁹ – which, as the comparison suggests, doubles the presentation, disjoins the presentational process from itself, in the same way that the New York scene itself is revealed in its essential modernity by the curious pictorial analogy of the Paul Veronese Venetians. The visionary process that “made sound somehow overflow into sight,” that made language, in its eidetic or rhetorical formalities, render things present in their detailed and differentiated presentness, accomplishes itself by exposing a difference that makes the scene more an allegorical rendering of itself than the revelation of presence. *Dichtung* and *Darstellung*, Kant’s terms for this uncouplable coupling, mesh tightly but do not fuse in synthetic unity. The “scene” of the presentation is divided. Anyone who takes this division or this difference for nothing, which in a way after all it is, does not know where James’s ghosts come from, fails to recognize “phantasmagoria” as the ethical or human ... of this difference. In fact, what the restless analyst “perceives” here is nothing if not a ghostly apparition of things, a fictional or figural presentation which presents itself as such. James contents himself in calling this type of vision “subjective” (201), his own use of quotation marks suggesting, however, that it is more complex than that, as we shall see further on.

Another presentation of the presentative process is that of the brooding analyst’s hilarious succumbing to the “historic imagination” in Independence Hall in Philadelphia. There, James writes, “the interval drops out and we mingle in the business.” What is the “business”? Nothing less of course than the concocting of the Declaration of Independence by the original concoctors who, probably out of reverence, go unnamed in this scenario wherein the speech act of all American speech acts, no doubt the *felicitous* speech act par excellence, from the author’s own perspective that is, is witnessed afresh, re-performed, re-imagined, not to say lampooned as an event that is *not* grounded in itself, does *not* originate in a deliberate and self-conscious utterance, is *not* serious, but is rather an etiolated, parasitic, impure act inspired by what J.L. Austen would have called the “backstage artiste” of the scene, of the place, “the charming facts” of which “go[...] of themselves” to produce – in a metaleptic foreshadowing of the restless analyst’s *own* speech acts – a “document” of the “highest” and most “sacred” order, presented or staged as divided from itself (214-216).¹⁰

works by some of the aforementioned authors listed in the bibliography, which offer a glimpse into the question, see Alison Ross’s excellent, if necessarily cursory, treatment of the subject in her book devoted to Kant, Heidegger, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (2007), and her article on Kant and Derrida (2001); see Beaufret and Gasché for perhaps the most succinct discussions of the notion of presentation (*Darstellung, Hypotyposis*) in Kant.

⁹ Here are a few details from the analogous scene in “The Turn of the Screw”: “He was in one of the angles [...] with both hands on the ledge. So I see him as I form the letters I form on this page; then [...] he slowly changed his place – passed [...] to the opposite corner of the platform. [...] and I can see at this moment the way his hand, as he went, moved from one of the crenellations to the next. He stopped at the other corner [...]” (1999 16-17)

¹⁰ J. Hillis Miller discusses Austin’s theory of speech acts in *Speech Acts in Literature*, where I take the “backstage artiste” quote from, p. 33. See also Miller’s *Literature as Conduct. Speech Acts in Henry James*, which alas does not include a chapter on *The American Scene*. Gert Buelens points out how the “almost” in this scenario (“the historic imagination, reascending the centuries, almost catches them in the act of directly suggesting the celebrated *coup*” [215]) suffices to keep agency on the side of the Founding Fathers (2000 411).

The presentation that unfolds in the “Museum of the relics of the Confederacy” (282-285), in the Richmond chapter, is also interesting for the way it stages the rhetorical (in)determination of historical sense. Here, in a chapter that is crucial for its introduction of the restless analyst’s civic consciousness of the post-Civil War South, sensible reality is presented as having “disengage[d] itself,” as “legend,” from the “idea” (“the flame-coloured *idea* has flowered out of the fact”), in accordance with the speculative interpretation of history everywhere in evidence in *The American Scene* (I shall return to this subject), a speculative fiction of history, of course, that presents the South as riddled with traces of separation, waste, excess, queerness, in short, as an artless world where sign and referent appear radically disjoined, a disjunction that is read in its turn as signifying the South’s defeat. Yet rather than reading this chapter as a literal presentation of historical truth in the eyes of the restless analyst, it should be read as a text about the (precarious) passage from text to history, as the Museum presentation makes clear with its tropological (“enchanted carpet”) and linguistic (“some verbal rendering of the grey effect”) allusions to the rhetorical language that makes this presentation possible, in other words as another text *about* the impure performativity of rhetorical language in the production of historical meaning.¹¹

Or else the stepping forth of “lonely Aphrodite” into the American light of the Boston Art Museum where she has been transplanted from her native Greece, not to lose symbolic power, however, from the displacement, as one would perhaps expect, but gaining rather in aesthetic beauty and significance in accordance with a genetic foreshortening of figurative possibilities that presents the presentative process as a historical synecdoche, not a gradual accretion of meaning over time but a leap of the statue from its ground into the reflective status of a trans-historical (and trans-national) figure subsuming its past (187-188). Synecdoches like this, where the figure separates itself from its context to stand for the whole of that context, frequently appear in James’s work in a temporalizing manner inscribing figure and ground in a genetic structure of thought or narrative linking past to present. A good example is at the beginning of “The Beast in the Jungle” where May Bartram – whom John Marcher would previously have met at the site of an excavation at Pompeii, an important spot in James’s travel writings, as we shall see further on – steps into the reflective gaze of the protagonist as a “voice” and a “face” which encrypts (1996 498), for this protagonist, the epistemological leap or difference that the trope of synecdoche implies. It would not be too difficult to show that the historic imagination in James’s travel writings often turns upon the use of this trope to initiate the fiction – “fond luxurious fallacy” (1993 614) – of an intimate “relation” between the present and the past. Recognizing the “fallacy” of this relation (as “readers” like Marcher fail to do) implies a recognition of the figural difference introduced by the trope responsible for establishing the relation itself.

Let me not forget, and to give just one more brief example, for the moment, of the presentative process upon which, as I have said, nearly every chapter in *The American Scene* turns as upon its “ironic center” (1984 1162), the morning stroll in Salem dedicated to the memory of Hawthorne. This stroll culminates in a performative reverie, mediated, one will recall, by the charmingly native boy (reinforcing in ethnic terms a fallacious sense of aesthetic

Indeed, the “almost” modifies the truth value of the brooding analyst’s vision, introducing a scepticism that always emerges in James’s reflections on the historic imagination, but not its performative character as a revision of the historic occasion and its metaleptic prefiguring of the analyst’s own speech act(s). In other words, I am not claiming that James literally removes agency from the founding act of the Fathers, but that he underscores with perhaps the most foundational analogy possible the irony or the fictional negativity of his own “documentary” act, in Austin’s terms its *infelicitous* or *impure* character. Buelens is interested in the “comic strategy” (410) of James’s treatment of the Founding Fathers and the site of the Declaration’s signing, I am interested in how these figures are orchestrated in a process revealing how historical meaning itself is produced.

¹¹ On the relation between text and history in James, see Andrzej Warminski’s admirable rhetorical reading of “The Altar of the Dead.”

closure or identity about to be overturned), about the allegorical disjunction between the “origin or reference” of literary symbol and the “inner force” of its “idea,” the rhetorical condition of the latter establishing a “connection” to the former which has “turned a somersault into space,” James writes, and been “repudiated like a ladder kicked back from the top of a wall.” (200-201) This imagery of tropological turning, of excess and of disjunction retrospectively invalidates the fond Emersonian fallacy of symbolic harmony – between “wisdom and poetry,” “Wahrheit and Dichtung” – sanctioned just prior to this in the Concord excursion (196); that fallacy which, as I have suggested, much criticism of *The American Scene* hesitates to go beyond.¹²

Each of these scenarios shows James rigorously fulfilling the cognitive exigency of adequation between figural language and meaning, on one hand, and ready to pull the carpet out from under the feet of cognitive awareness on the other. More precisely, they show him caught in the double constraint or double bind mentioned earlier. For the more intensely this awareness tries to resolve its fictional negativity in the presentation of things, as in the revelation of modernity that occurs in Central Park, the more inevitably that negativity in the form of the medium of presentation, language, presents itself to obscure the transparency of the presentative process. From a reflective standpoint, the more consciousness tries to present to itself the presentative process on which it is based the greater the likelihood it will encounter the limits of presentation as a tropological structure over which it has no control, however masterfully James inscribes the figural properties of language within a genetic system that would subordinate them to cognitive processes. James often appears to wish to display the most masterful designs in linking the cognitive to the tropological, but of course the very displaying undoes the link. This is not to say that he contrives to conceal the difference. The linking is of course inevitable. If he concealed the difference, he would be forfeiting his ironic insight to the kind of specular mystification that he exposes in the most blinkered of his characters, like John Marcher, or indulging in the aesthetic ideology he reveals in the “hotel-spirit” of the Waldorf Astoria, in *The American Scene*, where the puppet-lives of its victims go on “blissfully exempt from any principle or possibility of disaccord with itself”. Here, in accordance with the organizational “genius” of the place, “publicity as the vital medium” suppresses or forecloses the possibility of encountering the presentative limit of the “medium” itself (80-81). That limit which, I am suggesting, exposes itself in each of the presentative experiences that are presented in *The American Scene*. What I’m calling the presentative limit is what James, in the final chapter when he returns at length to the subject of America’s ideologically blinded and bemused, calls the “deceptive stitch” that the uncritical mind invariably fails to observe (“so placidly uncritical that the whitest thread of the deceptive stitch never makes it blink” [337]). What James calls the “technical imagination” (82) – nothing less, in Nietzschean terms, than the will to power as a will to suppress the experience of presentation as an experience of finitude – is the spectacular (in

¹² That it *is* a fallacy, however fond to its momentary beholder, is even clearer when this pair of scenarios is examined more carefully in their context. James emphasizes the Goethian and Schilleresque aspects of Transcendentalism in his Concord sketch only to rebuke in the Salem sub-chapter “the poor illusion of a *necessity* of relation between the accomplished thing, for poetry, for art, and those other quite equivocal things that we inflate our ignorance with seeing it suggested by” (201), a phrase which directly undermines the prior sanctioning of a sentiment of genetic causality between “things” and “images” in his performative reverie riffing off of Emersonian symbolism (“as if we were still seeing these [Concord] things *in* those [Emerson’s] images” [196]), ruining in the process any dream of a Dichtung/Wahrheit synthesis. The words “inflate our ignorance with seeing” in the phrase just quoted should probably be emphasized. What this chapter eloquently reveals is that James of course is an allegorist, not a symbolist, but his allegorism differs from Hawthorne’s in the amount of daylight he wishes to leave between image and thing, sign and referent. In short, not much. On allegory in *The American Scene* see Sheila Teahan’s remarkably concise study of the trope in her essay dealing with the engendering of culture in the text.

Debord's sense of the term) foreclosure of the difference or the disjunction in being of which the brooding tourist's "critically" or "analytically" minded (202) soliloquies are the ironical exposure. But to stick to him for the moment – I shall return shortly to the question of presentation as an experience of finitude and the condition of historicity –, there is no way out, for the brooding tourist, of the aforementioned double constraint, not even by submitting himself to it so fully that he can sometimes appear almost to have it both ways. The more earnestly he submits himself to this double allegiance, the more inevitably the disjunction between them materializes, one linguistic economy contaminating (not fusing with) the other and the breach (or the "deceptive stitch") between them exposing itself, which is what makes the ironical outlook on things the only viable one, from a "critical" or "analytical" perspective. Not that this irony amounts to any kind of superior knowledge, of course, for in terms of the subjectivity involved it is nothing if not the expression of a certain kind of helplessness. It is a good thing to have, much better than the seriousness of writers and critics who themselves ignore the breach between the performative and the constative, the tropological and the specular, and go about making all kinds of statements about the meaning of literary texts with a greater or lesser degree of modesty and epistemological rigor. Yet irony puts one, as the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* declares at the end of that most scandalously ironical of all of James's narratives, "altogether nowhere" (1953 319).¹³

The brooding tourist does not want to be altogether nowhere. Jamesian irony is sometimes a rather somber, if not gloomy, affair. Being the result of an epistemological rigor that the author cannot avoid, cannot sidestep in any manner, and the source of conflict between ethical and aesthetic injunctions that James explored with unrelenting seriousness in his late work, irony rarely serves the solely aesthetic purpose of pleasure in his writing, although there are occasional moments of forthright indulgence in it, as in the scenario that unfolds in Independence Hall ("What an admirable place for a Declaration of something! [...] I say, why not our independence – capital thing always to declare, and before anyone gets in with anything tactless."). On the whole though, to borrow and abuse somewhat one of James's own images, irony in his work is a bit like the mirthful South all outfitted in Protestant attire (231). James does not easily let himself be merely amused by it. And then there is the risk that irony and repetition, for *The American Scene* is nothing if not repetitive in its presentation of the presentative experience, will be mistaken for complicity with the power they resemble and fail empirically to critique, as Mark Seltzer illustrates so superbly in his political (or politicized) and historical (historicized) interpretation of *The American Scene*. Perhaps James has himself to blame to a certain degree for the fact that readers find it so easy to remain oblivious to his irony, since he himself was so serious about it. Yet there are other reasons which explain this obliviousness, of course. It is easy to see why anyone wishing to extract from *The American Scene* a pragmatic critical awareness capable of countering the American spirit of totalizing (and potentially totalitarian) spectacle must ignore the ironic structure of the text. For if irony allows for no totality, no closure (or foreclosure) of the text, it allows for no stable or reliable "subjectivity" either. Just as the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* cannot win his argument with Mrs. Brissendon in the final chapters of that book and must simply leave Newmarch, the critical analyst of *The American Scene*, faced with the "paradise" (81) or "heaven" (329) of the American spirit which he knows is an illusion since it is based on the foreclosure of the very finitude of which he is ironically aware – that is, aware in an equivocal way which undermines the empirical value of his awareness –, must content himself, as James as author must, with repeating the presentative process as a presentative experience of finitude, with the knowledge of course that it will be readable, but with no hope of making it applicable to the empirical world. Irony cannot empirically counter

¹³ I attempt to deal with this scandal as it presents itself in James's own conflicted apprehension of it in "L'inquiétante modernité de *The Sacred Fount*."

the technical imagination as a suppression of presentation as an experience of finitude, but in presenting presentation repeatedly, bringing it into the open as a question, in the form of the text, finitude is exposed as the unsurpassable and ineluctable experience of presentation.

That is why presentation as a question is the principle obsession of *The American Scene*. Presentation – the “scene” of *The American Scene* – is a haunting experience in the sense that it is incorrigibly divided from itself, and this hauntedness, no more than the ironical mode of discourse of which it is a trace, is unlikely to present itself as a viable form of cognitive awareness to compete with the “organizational” spirit of the world and the aesthetic ideology of harmony and closure it entails.¹⁴ Yet precisely insofar as presentation remains a question, and this must eternally be the case, since there is no surmounting the double bind which is its condition, that question possesses and even presents to the world in a certain manner a critical force. That critical force does not belong, however, to a subject. It belongs only to the text.

III. Sargent’s Portrait: Irony as the Presentation of Liberty

Let me turn then to one presentation of the presentative experience in the *The American Scene* that stands slightly apart from the others, if only because it introduces them in a certain manner. In other words, presents them. Even though presentation cannot fully present itself, which is why it remains a question, James is always trying to foreground, in one way or another, the process, as he does here by offering what is doubtless the most theatrical, not to say spectacular, presentation of the presentative experience right off the bat, in the book’s first chapter¹⁵. This is the scenario that unfolds in Harvard Hall where the brooding analyst encounters Sargent’s portrait of Major Henry Lee Higginson. Like Nick Dormer’s encounter with Gabriel Nash early in the first book of *The Tragic Muse*, or John Marcher’s fateful encounter with May Bartram in the opening paragraphs of “The Beast in the Jungle,” the encounter with Sargent’s portrait is a specular presentation of the topological structure of language that reduces, or foreshortens, that structure into the reflective basis of consciousness, stabilizing perception and calming the restless analyst’s exposure to epistemological tension (“and so eased off the intensity” of the “appeal” of “ghosts” [48]).

Clearly James is setting the stage here for the succession of such encounters that occur in *The American Scene*, where the “relation,” as he often puts it, between aspect and meaning, appearance and sense, impression and idea is constituted in the same genetic process of

¹⁴ That may seem obvious, but it is clearly not obvious to empirically minded readers, like Seltzer, who insists on the “underlying unity and discreet continuity” between “art” and “power” in *The American Scene* (Seltzer 109). It is difficult not to see such readings as resentful, in Nietzsche’s sense of the word, of art, that is of the radical disjunction at the heart of the presentative experience of life. Seltzer, who sees a tendency on the part of even the most politically conscious critics to “depoliticize” and to “dehistoricize” literary texts (139), criticizes readers of *The American Scene* who see a “discontinuity between artistic and referential imperatives” and states his own conviction of an “entanglement between compositional and historical, discursive and political practices,” claiming that the “scandal” he wishes to expose is *not* in James’s “artful evasion or disavowal of the actualities of history and power” but rather in that he “risks, calls attention to, this scandal in order to repress what is truly scandalous about his text: not an opposition between art and power but an underlying unity and discreet continuity between them.” In the next sentence this “unity” and “discreet continuity” become a “collaboration” (109), further on a “surreptitious linkage” (125), and one could go on. In short, James plays the aesthete in a secret ploy for power. The resentfulness I see in this apparently sophisticated reading of *The American Scene* is not by any means merely personal, of course, but an effect of a very widespread tendency in criticism to fall back into the concerns of the self in the empirical world in the encounter with literary texts. Where these concerns are not by any means obvious, then they are resentfully supposed to be “surreptitiously” present.

¹⁵ In her article included in this collection, Marie-Odile Salati shows that the 1905 essay that serves as the initial chapter of *English Hours* functions to highlight in a similar manner key elements of the scenarios that are repeated throughout the succeeding chapters of that book which were written previously.

specular presentation that is dramatized here, always, as I have insisted, with the evidence of a certain linguistic residue or tropological excess. James here is representing the presentative process, insisting on the specular character of perception and on its genetic principle as it will be deployed in *The American Scene*, and emphasizing furthermore what I have called the double bind at the basis of its ironic mode of discourse, that is the allegiance both to cognitive and to tropological figural economies. Representation must be understood here as a form of presentative insistence, and indeed of repetitive insistence, not as imitation.

Not only is the presentative logic of the Harvard Hall scenario deployed throughout *The American Scene*, as a model of sorts of things to come, were it thereafter in a less explicitly specular manner, but it also turns out to be a repetition of important scenarios that unfold in *English Hours* (and in a slightly different form in *Transatlantic Sketches*) and *Italian Hours*. Indeed, the presentative logic at work in *The American Scene* is deployed throughout James's travel writings and is by no means unique to the late travelogue. The presentative scenario in *English Hours* I am referring to that most explicitly echoes the scenario at Harvard Hall is the twilight presentation of Haddon Hall in the Lichfield and Warwick chapter (1993a 73-75) – the rooks “wheeling” and “clamoring” in the sky as they do at Bly, to mention another repetition of this scenario, just before the governess's specular apprehension of the ghost of Peter Quint in the scene previously referred to –, and the scenario in *Italian Hours* I have in mind is the tourist's “fond luxurious fallacy of a close communion, a direct revelation” of Pompeii (1993b 613-614) in the late sketch entitled “The Saint's Afternoon,” also under a falling light that so often dramatizes in James, as I suggested earlier, the specular *turn* that reduces the tropological ground of the soliloquy, mimed by the wheeling and circling of the birds at Haddon Hall, to the reflective basis of consciousness. I have proposed readings of these scenarios elsewhere so will not do so here.¹⁶ A few elements of these intense presentative experiences are worth insisting on, however, to enhance recognition of what occurs in the Harvard Hall scenario and with regard to the question of aesthetic presentation in general.

It is worth noting, for instance, that Pompeii figures in both scenarios, since, as James observes in *English Hours*, the “comparison is odd, but Haddon Hall reminded me perversely of some of the larger houses at Pompeii.” (1993a 75) This is worth noting because Pompeii, as the archeological site par excellence, stands for a buried past which it is so often a matter, in James's travel writing, of excavating by means of the specular presentation of its “idea.” Lacking such figures of historical depth in his native land, the presentative experience of the restored absentee is often dependent, of course, on distant memories dug up from his personal past, as he informs us from the opening paragraph of *The American Scene*. Yet, since memory and history are but the two sides of the same aesthetic coin for James, and since temporal depth is a presentational effect created by the semiotic alignment of figure and ground, image and thing, it matters little, from a performative point of view, where the ideal to be presented in sensible form comes from. Because it is precisely an ideal, not in the Platonist sense but in the sense that it exists *nowhere*, has *no reality* whatsoever, other than in the eidetic formalities or rhetorical properties of language, it is an excellent thing to have places like Pompeii to wander about in which offer, at modest expense to the traveller, the stagecraft necessary to an imagination as speculative as that of James. For it is, of course, all stagecraft. *Technè mimesthai*. From Emerson's Concord to Haddon Hall, from Mount Vernon to Pompeii, it is all a borrowing of scenery to erect a rather private play. If the historical scenery is lacking, as in America of course it often is, then the scenery of one's private past, the “archaeology of intimate memory,” must suffice.¹⁷ Whatever its source, only an insubstantial idea can present

¹⁶ Henry James. *Le Principe spectral de la représentation*, p. 373-391.

¹⁷ See Marie-Odile Salati's discussion of the “archaeology of intimate memory” (“*l'archéologie du souvenir intime*”) in her study of *The American Scene* (97-100)

reality, that is to say itself, with the kind of rich, detailed, penetrating slices of life that James likes. Only an idea not too self-consciously conceived in advance can present itself and things realistically, not only because one does not want to have any allegorical stagecraft hanging visibly over the scene (which sometimes in fact doesn't bother James too much), as would be the case with a preconceived idea, one too voluntarily contrived for the occasion, but because such an idea would have little or no speculative capacity, would exhaust its performative potential in a thinly iconic encounter with the real, like Hawthorne's letter lighting up the sky over Boston in *The Scarlet Letter*, instead of (dis)appearing in the sensible exhibition of things. Or else would scarcely be a "relation" at all, a presentation merely of facts, for which newspapers and photography suffice. A good abstract idea like "modernity" in the Central Park revelation, with a little stagecraft borrowed from Veronese, can also turn the trick. Or the idea of a man like Washington, to metonymically present his home at Mount Vernon.¹⁸ For T.S. Eliot was right to say that James had "a mind so fine that no idea could violate it," if we understand by this that no idea could present itself to James that did not present (itself as) reality. An unrepresented idea does not exist for James, and when it presents itself it is reality that is presented. The scene appears lit from within. His brooding tourists have ideas only as they incarnate themselves, or on the ghostly verge of incarnation. But that the idea should come from very far back, either historically or in memory, as most often is the case, is above all essential to the performativity of the genetic principle of presentation. It is precisely the long extension of the "backward reach" (70), the *over-reaching* reach of the genetic process of memory and of the historical imagination, grasping towards an unreachable anteriority, that makes the presentative process so performative, so impurely performative, and the "speculative tension" (247) so intense.¹⁹ For an ideal idea presents itself as the intimation of an immemorial past, beyond the reach of voluntary memory and enlisting thereby, in the appeal for sensible presentation, all the rhetorical and mimetic faculties at the restless ironist's disposal. These then "minister to" (a verb James solicits frequently) the presentation of the idea as sensible reality, or of this reality as an idea. Indeed, insofar as they are structured genetically, memory and the historical imagination, the "fatal historic sense" (1993b 610), are not authentic temporal structures: the Italian *hours*, the English *hours* signify rhetorical instances of cognitive awareness not the passing of time. Temporality, finitude, the truly historical character of the presentative experience is not presented in the genetic structure of the process but in the difference between that process and its linguistic or tropological excess.

The Harvard Hall scenario presents this excess or disjunction as an unavowable reserve of meaning effaced in the specular and genetic process of aesthetic representation. It is upon this unavowable reserve of meaning that the trope of irony, the dominant trope of *The American Scene*, is based. One need only consider an instant the awful revelation, repulsive, sickening to the restless analyst, of "the hotel-spirit in sole *articulate* possession" (326, emphasis *not* mine) of the American scene, as we read in the final chapter, James's long meditation on the aesthetic ideology to come, a post-face, really, to the work, on the Spectacle to come of actors without art in a miraculous world without theatre, without presentation, everyone an actor-spectator turning circles in front of his own publicity stunts – a world, in other words, wherein the "aesthetic revel" (327) of presentation is occulted by, and inevitably passes for, mere *aestheticism*, a world ripe for "cultural studies" –, to recognize perhaps the

¹⁸ "The beauty of the site, meanwhile, as we stand there, becomes but the final aspect of the man; under which everything conduces to a single great representative image, under which every feature of the scene, every object in the house, however trivial, borrows from it and profits by it." (248-249)

¹⁹ In the *Transatlantic Sketches* version of the Haddon Hall scenario presentation is achieved with "almost painful intensity" (1875 26), revised in *English Hours* to the apparently less embarrassing "the last, the right intensity." (1993a 74). Presentative experience is an affective experience which, as the two opposing formulations suggest, is related to the well-known ambivalence of the sublime, a subject which can only be alluded to here.

critical value of this reserve, of this *inarticulate* remainder, of which irony is, let's say, the ambassador. But I shall return to this critical value in a moment.

The figural logic of the scenario at Harvard Hall turns upon a metonymic reversal of past and future that rhetoricians call *metalepsis*.²⁰ Essential to the presentative scenario is the leap outside of empirical reality into the topological fiction of the sign. For what occurs here is that the "backward vision" of the restless analyst reverses itself – at "day's end," the typical stage-lighting in James for this kind of reversal – into a forward-looking or proleptic perspective in the hopes that "inspiration" will be able to catch up to itself by its "projection" of a specular image reflecting the past. The specular image of Higginson's portrait, we shall see in an instant, functions as a "commemoration" of the past that enables what James calls inspiration, outrunning itself, to reclaim itself at the end of what on first sight appears to be the accomplishment of a genetic act of cognition, linking the projected future to the past, but is in fact revealed to be determined by a *metaleptic* twist or turn that is irreducible to cognitive behavior. The discontinuity between cognitive awareness before and after this turn, or the gap between the genetic process of cognition and the topological reversal which underwrites it, is thematized by James, figuratively of course, by the transport of a "magic carpet" by which the gap is traversed; the key event, upon which the genetic structure of cognition turns out to be based, is a topological leap from empirical reality into the reflective fiction of the sign that Sargent's portrait represents. Here it necessary to read the scenario in its entirety.

It was after all in the great Hall of the Union perhaps (to come back to that delicate day's end) that the actual vibration of response seemed most to turn to audible music [...]. For the case was unmistakably that just there, more than anywhere, by a magnificent stroke, an inspiration working perhaps even beyond its consciousness, the right provision had been made for the remembering mind. The place was addressed in truth so largely to an enjoying and producing future that it might seem to frown on mere commemoration, on the backward vision; and yet, at the moment I speak of, its very finest meaning might have been that of a liberal monument to those who had come and gone, to the company of the lurking ghosts. The air was full of them, and this was its service, that it cared for them *all*, and so eased off the intensity of their appeal. And yet it appeared to play that part for a reason more interesting than reducible to words – a reason that mainly came out for me while, in the admirable hall aforesaid, I stood before Sargent's high portrait of Major Henry Lee Higginson, *donatorio* of the house (as well as author, all round about, of innumerable other civil gifts); a representation of life and character, a projection of genius, which even that great painter has never outdone. Innumerable, ever, are the functions performed and the blessings wrought by the supreme work of art, but I know of no such case in which it has been so given to such a work to make the human statement with a great effect, to interfuse a group of public acts with the personality, with the characteristics of the actor. The acts would still have had all their value if the portrait had had less, but they would not assuredly have been able to become so interesting, would not have grown to affect each beneficiary, however obscure, as proceeding, for him, from a possible relation, a possible intimacy. It is to the question of intimacy with somebody or other that all great practical public recognition is finally carried back – but carried only by the magic carpet, when the magic carpet happens to be there. Mr. Sargent's portrait of Henry Higginson is exactly the magic carpet. (47-48)

James's aesthetic creed of a humanistic reduction of the topological conditions of experience is fully thematized here in dramatic terms, not only in the representation of Sargent's portrait of Henry Higginson ("a representation of life and character"), but in the textual presentation of the presentative experience in which that representation appears, or, as

²⁰ See Paul de Man's discussion of this trope in his reading of Wordsworth's "The Winander Boy" (de Man, 1993 74-94).

the term *donatorio* suggests, gives itself.²¹ On the simplest level, the portrait presents itself to the restless tourist as a stable reflective surface upon which all the “ghosts” of the past, traces of the backward vision, find commemorative representation, marking the achievement of a genetic process linking the past to present in temporal unity. According to this genetic logic an “inspiration working perhaps even beyond its consciousness” will have managed to catch up to itself, to find in its “projection” an end reflecting its origin, closing the loop of cognitive self-awareness. This genetic model of temporal consciousness turns out, however, as I’ve already mentioned, to be an illusion conditioned by the metaleptic leap out of empirical reality into the fiction of the sign. The linguistic character of the presentative experience is thematized from the outset by the allusion to a certain “vibration” turning to “audible music,” such vibrations and music commonly figuring in James (see “The Turn of the Screw” and *The Sacred Fount*, for example) a linguistic faculty which cannot be appropriated by the subject by other means than its specular foreshortening or reduction, which is why when the portrait presents itself it is said to be of a quality “more interesting than reducible to words.” As we saw in the Central Park presentation “that made sound somehow overflow into sight,” *Darstellung* implies the negation of *Dichtung*, since the former is precisely the accomplishment of the latter, that is of a certain topological activity which one should not too hastily reduce to an empirical act of speech²². Indeed, the linguistic performativity presented here is “inhuman” in the sense that the tropes upon which presentative experience depends are by no means continuous with the specular (re)presentation of this experience as a “human statement.” The “magic carpet” that links the two is itself the specular operation of a trope, a metaleptic reversal which, as this fabulist or unrealistic image of flying suggests, cognition has no control over, no mastery of, despite the ineluctable attempt to inscribe this movement within a genetic process in which consciousness reclaims authority for itself. James reveals the cognitive fiction of an adequate relation between consciousness and tropes and the empirically insurmountable disjunction between the two. For, once again, the performative dimension of language which is thematized here as an “inspiration working perhaps even beyond its consciousness” catches up to itself, is reduced to constative terms, only by means of what is a literally inconceivable substitution of empirical reality by a fictional representation, that is by Sargent’s portrait. Like the “deceptive stitch” alluded to earlier, the “magic carpet” designates a disjunction between the genetic structure of

²¹ Much could be said about James’s use of the word “*donatorio*” to designate the donation or giving of human sense that occurs here with the specular reduction of the topological. The specular turn always consists of a donation of sense, of a giving and of a human figuring of sense, except where, as in texts like “The Turn of the Screw,” the process breaks down in the paradoxical revelation of itself amidst the cognitive act it conditions. If in a general, schematic manner the “reflectors” of James’s fiction can be divided into those for which the specular donation of sense breaks down in its revelation (the governess) and those for which the donation as such is occulted (John Marcher), these two cases marking the limit experiences of reflective consciousness, *The American Scene*, on the contrary, demonstrates in each of the presentative experiences presented the double allegiance to both specular and topological linguistic economies, reflective self-awareness and otherness. Only in “The Jolly Corner,” written shortly after *The American Scene*, does James manage as effectively to present the double injunction which traverses his entire work. On what would appear to be James’s misuse of the Italian word, *donatorio*, see Daniel Hannah’s discussion of Sargent’s portrait (166).

²² Michel Imbert’s readings of *The American Scene* (2001, 2003) draw their critical force from this critic’s sensitivity to the materialism of linguistic excess, not, however, as a non-phenomenal material contamination of one linguistic economy by another, in accordance with the double constraint inherent to all discursive structures and critically presented by the literary text, but rather as an irruption of material linguistic alterity within the literary discourse of the “aesthete.” The discontinuity is located in the psyche of the writer alienated or dispossessed by language rather than in the figural (non-phenomenal) event which the literary text presents. This ultimately makes of the discontinuity an empirical event, which Imbert would have constitute the ground of a “cultural materialism” (2003) subverting “aesthetic” discourse, instead of an event which must remain forever beyond the reach of empirical understanding and calling for aesthetic (literary, pictorial, musical, etc.) presentation.

consciousness and the tropological principle which traverses it, a disjunction which is overcome only by means of a specular fiction. The genetic process of the “remembering mind,” for which “provision” will have been made, James writes, by a “magnificent stroke,” is dependent upon a tropological event, a leap from empirical to fictional reality, that memory can make no authentic claim of assimilating. Once again, however, far from dissimulating the heterogeneity between the tropological and the cognitive, the performative and the descriptive economies of language in which presentative experience is inscribed, James thematizes this **heterogeneity in** dramatic terms.

Before concluding it is worth pointing out that the metaleptic turn dramatized at the beginning of *The American Scene* is reproduced, as a chiasmatic repetition of the first, at the end of the penultimate chapter of the book devoted to Charleston, where, instead of “landing” in the fictional sign of Sargent’s portrait, the leap from empirical reality remains suspended until the “aftertime” of James’s text, that is the time of the (re)presentation in writing of the presentation which unfolds here as the “canvas” of St. Michael’s Church (309-310). The disjunctive leap between the empirical *before* and the figural *after* of the presentative event is no longer speculated, then, as in the book’s opening chapter, by the reflective image of the portrait – Sargent being the double of the brooding tourist in the sense that his portrait is a specular image of the presentative experience that is presented by the text – but by the text itself. In other words, what is dramatized at the end of the book is the tropological disjunction, the figurative bark designating it changing however from a magic carpet to a drifting skiff (“making my skiff fast to no conclusion whatever, only pushing out again and letting it, for a supreme impression and to prepare in the aftertime the best remembrance, drift where it would”), between the third-person figure of the restless analyst and the first-person figure of the author in the aftertime of the presentative event (“it [the skiff] touches *now* once more of its own motion, carries *me* back and puts *me* ashore on the one spot where my impression had been perfectly felicitous” [my emphasis]). The book winding now to its completion, the specular fiction of visual experience which Sargent’s portrait served to establish is elegantly abandoned and the disjunction at the heart of the presentative experience is metonymically presented as the difference between the brooding tourist prior to the proleptic turn (“to prepare in the aftertime the best remembrance”) and the writer as the future artistic beneficiary of its accomplishment, or, from the retrospective perspective of the finished work, between the fictional self of the traveller and the empirical self of the author. *The American Scene* is thematically inscribed between a leap into the specular fiction of cognitive perception, on one hand, and a leap into a written text on the other, both events being of course inconceivable in empirical terms, but solely as the action of tropes upon which the genetic structure of consciousness always reveals itself in James to be based. Memory, like historical consciousness, is not a cognitive act at all but a tropological one. Although this insight is demonstrated in each of the presentative experiences presented by the text, James emphasizes in particularly dramatic terms at the outset and at the end of the narrative (the final chapter being, as I have suggested, a bleak post-face of empirical triumph in which the presentative experience of life is ideologically suppressed) that there is no way back from our empirical world to the experience of *The American Scene* that does not pass through the disjunctive turn of the trope, of tropological signs in general.

Like the other presentative experiences presented (or represented) by James’s text, but at a more explicit level of apprehension, the Harvard Hall scenario presents the double allegiance that constantly emerges in *The American Scene* and which is constitutive, I have argued, of the discursive irony of the text. The text is an ironic parable of the textual experience of life, “textual” here referring to the disjunctive play of the trope, of *Dichtung*, of impurely performative language as it determines, and exceeds, human consciousness. The ironic structure of the text undercuts its own possibility of saying anything in a reliably

documentary manner, just as it ruins in advance the critic's ability to say anything about its social, cultural, political or historical referentiality in a reliable, that is critical, manner. The critical force of the text lies elsewhere: not in its documentary appeal but in the presentation of the experience of presentation as an experience of finitude, which is the condition of historicity itself. The truly historical event is an event beyond the reach of human imagination which imagination manages nonetheless to register as such, to be affected by. It is such events that are repeatedly, obsessively presented in *The American Scene*, which is therefore, and in this sense precisely, a historical text. It is not a historical text because of the history it makes reference to, however much this history may interest us, but because of the history it *makes*, presentative experience testifying in necessarily figural terms to the discontinuity at the heart of presentative experience itself. The text's irony, finally, is not constraining but the presentation of liberty, of deliverance from the American spirit, more delusional and oppressive in its enthrallment to spectacle in our day certainly than in 1907. Yet this liberty is before us, it is presented to us. It is not between the lines of the text nor in some context to be divulged from it, but in the text itself as the presentative experience of life. It asks one thing of us only, nothing else, which is that we become readers of it.

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