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Recommended Citation
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Go East, Young Man, and Discover Your Country*

Donald A. Ringe

The West has a powerful hold on the American imagination. Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson—for most Americans these are not names remembered from history. They are legendary figures looming out of a heroic past. "Westward the course of empire takes its way," "Manifest Destiny," "Passage to India"—these are not merely slogans. They express the deeply felt conviction that Americans are involved in a great westward movement, providential in its guidance and directed toward a grand consummation. So powerful is the myth that it not only finds expression in our literature and popular culture, but informs as well much important scholarship in literary and cultural history. I need only mention, among others, three influential books: Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950); Edwin Sill Fussell's *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (1965); and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973) to show the pervasiveness of the theme in American studies.

Why, then, you may ask, have I taken as my title a direct inversion of Horace Greeley's famous advice, "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country"? It is not that I wish to minimize the significance of the frontier in the development of the American character. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis has been with us for a century and has borne significant fruit. But too great an emphasis on the western frontier can blind us to other aspects of the American experience that should also be considered if we are to understand ourselves as a people and a nation. A number of years ago, for example, in an important book on James Fenimore Cooper's sea fiction, Thomas Philbrick wrote that the sea was the major American frontier during the first half of the nineteenth century and that Cooper's greatest achievement was in...
the maritime novel. Now these are not received opinions, but one would think that they are at least debatable ones on which reasonable men may differ. But a reviewer of the book in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* was so incensed by these ideas—so blinded by the myth of the West—that he ridiculed them, dismissed them out of hand, and insulted the author with the suggestion that he might have corrected his views by taking an elementary course in American history! So much for intellectual discussion.

At the risk of provoking a similar response, I would like to propose yet another way to approach the American character, one that turns our attention eastward. It is based upon a suggestion by James Fenimore Cooper, who, in a letter written at Rome in 1830, comments upon the letters of Thomas Jefferson, which he was just then reading. Jefferson's "knowledge of Europe," Cooper observes, "was of immense service to him. Without it, no American is fit to speak of the institutions of his own Country, for as nothing human is perfect, it is only by comparison, that we can judge our own advantages." In this passage Cooper emphasizes American strengths, but once one begins to make comparisons, advantages and disadvantages may appear on either side. In time, what he and two other American writers learned from their experience in Europe enabled them to perceive the limitations of American society as well. James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James all lived in Europe for extended periods, all were keen observers of the life they found there, and all recorded in their work, both fiction and non-fiction, what they learned about Americans from their European sojourns.

Cooper arrived in Europe in June 1826 to begin a tour that was to last more than seven years and take him to England, France, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, and a number of the German and Italian states. Though he traveled widely, he also lived for various periods of time in such cities as London, Paris, Berne, Florence, Naples, Rome, and Dresden, where he wrote, saw the various tourist sights, and still found time for an active social life. He was entertained by members of the Whig aristocracy in London, moved in liberal circles in Paris, and became the close friend of the Marquis de Lafayette. Cooper thus had ample opportunity to study the social and political conditions of the countries in which
he resided, most particularly the England of George IV shortly before the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, and the France of the Bourbon Restoration, the July Revolution of 1830, and the monarchy of Louis Philippe. Patriotic American that he was, Cooper could not fail to perceive the difference between the American polity and what he found in Europe. As a professional writer he was determined to treat those differences in his books.

Cooper discovered too that most Europeans were almost totally ignorant of the United States. Even well-educated men had little knowledge of American geography or history, and the only American names that were widely recognized were those of Franklin and Washington—with Jefferson, perhaps, running a poor third. Americans as a whole were generally looked down upon as both physically and morally inferior, and many Europeans expected them to be black! The situation was only made worse by European travelers—mostly British—who came to the United States and wrote highly critical accounts of all that they found here. To counter these prejudiced views, Cooper undertook—at the repeated urging of Lafayette—to write a book in defense of his country. Notions of the Americans (1828), Cooper's first work of non-fiction, was the result, a book that gives a glowing account of American society revealed through a series of letters supposedly written by a traveling bachelor—apparently a Belgian—to his friends in Europe. Though the book undoubtedly presents too favorable a view of the United States in 1828, Cooper, it must be remembered, was trying to counteract the many reports by British travelers who, in his view, sinned in the opposite direction.

Cooper was also concerned that many Americans had false notions of Europe—especially England—created and sustained by the steady flow of British publications into the United States. In the absence of an international copyright agreement, it was cheaper to reprint British books in America than to publish those of native writers, since no payment had to be made to the British authors. In Cooper's view, this was not only an act of injustice against the British writers; it was also a practice dangerous to American institutions. The opinions of British journals like Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine or the London Quarterly Review were directly opposed to American principles, and the novels of Sir Walter Scott—so popular in this country that the pirates went to any lengths to obtain early copies—were so saturated with aristocratic values as to threaten to undermine American belief in
their own institutions. In addition, many Americans failed to perceive that the much admired British society was based on a principle of exclusion. Though ostensibly a monarchy with a parliamentary government, it was before 1832 in practice an aristocracy with power in the hands of a small hereditary class. For Americans to admire such a system was, for Cooper, to betray their own principles.

When Cooper came to the defense of American institutions, he learned some unpleasant things about a number of his countrymen. He accepted the fact that aristocrats in France and England would oppose him, since men are always quick to defend their own interests, but he expected American support. He did not get it. In 1831, for example, he was drawn reluctantly into the debate on the French budget when Lafayette asked him to vindicate republican institutions by replying to an article in the *Rêve Brittanique* in which the author had argued that the expenses of a republic exceeded those of a monarchy. Cooper's able response, his *Letter to General Lafayette*, became a point of controversy. Much to Cooper's chagrin, Casimir Périé, the French premier, remarked in the Chamber of Deputies that William Cabell Rives, the American minister to France, took the side of the French government, a statement that Rives never disavowed. And Leavitt Harris, an American attached to the legation, published a letter in support of the French position. Cooper was horrified that American representatives in Europe could so far betray the interests of their country as to side with a foreign government whose position was motivated by anti-republican principles.

Nor was this all. Cooper had recently published *The Bravo* (1831), a novel set in eighteenth-century Venice. Its purpose was political. Cooper set out to show that Venice, though in form a republic, was in fact ruled by an aristocracy, for the state was controlled by a small group of privileged men who had exclusive political power, who resolved all questions in favor of the interests of their class, and who oppressed the common people and denied them liberty. The objects of Cooper's attack were, in reality, the aristocracy of England, who Cooper believed ruled the country in their own selfish interests, and the Doctrinaires of France, who wanted to establish a similarly aristocratic system under Louis Philippe's monarchy. But the book is addressed to an American audience. Cooper wanted his fellow countrymen to see the aristocratic reality that lay behind the appearance of things in
Europe, and to trust to their own principles and institutions rather than seek analogies and models abroad. He wanted them to understand, too, that the powers in Europe attacked the United States with vituperation because its free institutions, so long as they endured, were a threat to all who sought to maintain a government of exclusion.

Cooper's attack on aristocracy is an able one. The Bravo is an excellent analysis of the workings of a commercial oligarchy and a thoroughly convincing depiction of its totalitarian rule. It even contains a warning, as some modern critics have suggested, that American principles could be subverted and American liberty destroyed if the republic should fall into the hands of such a group of men. Because of the soundness of his theme, Cooper expected support from his fellow Americans. But once again he found himself attacked in an unfavorable review of the book that appeared in the New York American, a Whig newspaper. Because the reviewer had used the Paris edition of the novel, Cooper believed that the review had originated with an agent of the French government. Hence, he thought, the American press was reprinting attacks on him by his—and their—enemies. But the review had been written by an American, Edward Sherman Gould, then living in Paris. If anything, this was worse, for it meant that some Americans at least were attracted to European institutions, and that American newspapers run by Whig editors would print their attacks on him. Such was indeed the case. The Whig press soon became sharp in its criticism of Cooper's activities in Europe.

This is not the place to recount once again Cooper's well-known war with the Whig press. Suffice it to say that he continued to defend American principles of democracy and personal liberty. After his return to the United States in 1833, however, he also began to satirize American failings. The Whig press responded with additional attacks which in time became so personal that Cooper sought relief in the courts. He sued the editors for libel. Although Cooper won most of his cases, the Whigs controlled a powerful press. An attack on Cooper in one newspaper was likely to be reprinted in others around the country, and over a period of time the Whigs managed to damage his reputation. Small wonder, then, that Cooper perceived the merchant class, a major element in the Whig party, as the enemies of democracy. Engrossed in the interests of the moment, they were, in his opinion, without fixed principles. They resolved all
questions in terms of profit. Left to themselves, with the help of a partisan press that was equally unprincipled, they would eventually convert the country into a monied aristocracy and make common cause with the exclusive and oppressive societies which Cooper had seen in Europe.

So much for the men of commerce, the new American aristocrats. What of the common people? About them, Cooper was more ambivalent. As a class, ordinary Americans were superior to the oppressed peoples he saw in Europe. The free institutions of the United States had allowed its citizens to reach a higher level of attainment than had been achieved by the mass of people elsewhere. But Americans also fell far short of the level of civilization achieved by the educated classes of Europe, and the leveling tendencies of American society made it difficult for anyone to rise above mediocrity. Lacking in worldly experience and ignorant of anything beyond their borders, untraveled Americans were provincial in their attitudes and manners. They could hardly understand what society was like in a national capital like London or Paris, when all their country had to offer was a commercial town like New York, yet in their national pride they resented any suggestion that America was not superior in all things to the rest of the world. Their lack of sophistication threatened to make them easy prey to British writers who would give them false notions of Europe, or to American demagogues who would flatter their national pride for political advantage.

In Cooper's view, every society had to have a small group at the top to give the entire social structure its purpose, direction, and tone. In Europe, this function was performed by the aristocracy, a hereditary class with exclusive political power who used it to serve their own selfish interests. Cooper detested aristocracy, but he knew that an aristocratic society sustained a high degree of civility and supported both knowledge and the arts. The problem for America was to achieve similar results under a democratic regime. He believed that a class of gentleman democrats—Jefferson's men of virtue and talent—could provide such leadership. They would not be aristocrats because they would have as a class no political power but that granted to individual members by the people in free elections. Yet they would possess those civilizing qualities that could raise American society above the level of mediocrity. Ideas like these were not popular in the United States during the 1830s, and Cooper was shouted down by
the Whig newspapers. But without such a class, Cooper maintained, those men would rise to the top whose only claim to distinction was the possession of money. If so, the effect on American society would be disastrous.

All well and good, you may say. But wasn't Cooper also a novelist of the frontier? Didn't he write about the American West? True enough. But Cooper's Leatherstocking tales and other border romances are no celebrations of the frontier. Natty Bumppo and his Indian friends of course excepted, Cooper's frontiersmen are mostly lawless, violent men, and his settlers, in *The Pioneers* at least, are selfish despoilers of the landscape. All need the restraints of the kind of civil society Cooper envisioned with a democratic gentleman at its head. What Cooper began to learn in Europe and had confirmed for him on his return to the United States was that by the 1830s American society itself was changing—and in his opinion much for the worse. In place of the old republic whose principles he defended, he found a leveling democracy of arrogant, ignorant people, pandered to yet manipulated by a partisan newspaper press that was itself the instrument of a monied class. Cooper resisted the change. He believed, nonetheless, that the heart of the country was sound, and as late as 1850, he could still write of the providential destiny of the United States. He died in 1851. Within a generation, the men of money had carried the day in American society.

II

Nathaniel Hawthorne went to Europe in July 1853 under circumstances very different from Cooper's. When Cooper arrived in Paris in 1826, he had already achieved an international reputation, and he continued to write and publish while living abroad. Seven novels and a major work of nonfiction came from his pen during his stay, and he was able to support his family well on what he earned as an author. Hawthorne was not so fortunate. Though his books had been well received, they had not been financially successful, and Hawthorne had to rely on political patronage to survive. He had served in the Custom House at Boston (1839-40) and at Salem (1846-49), but on both occasions the election of Whigs to the presidency had thrown him out of office. In 1852, however, his old college mate and life-long friend, Franklin Pierce, was nominated by the Democrats, and Hawthorne
wrote the campaign biography. When Pierce was elected, Hawthorne was rewarded with the lucrative appointment as United States Consul at Liverpool. Hawthorne was happy to make his first and only voyage to Europe, and he hoped to earn enough during his tenure to secure his family's future.

The price he had to pay was four years of wearying duties in the consulate office, where he had to deal with "brutal captains and brutish sailors," the coming and going of American tourists, and a host of "beggars, cheats, [and] unfortunates," many of whom were trying to make their way to the United States. Liverpool was not Paris. Hawthorne was shocked at the drabness of the city and the filth and degradation of the lowest class, who lived in abject poverty. Most of the Englishmen he met were of the merchant class, and he endured public banquets, where he was often called upon to speak. Yet he did get away at times to see the tourist sights of Great Britain, and although he did not make as much money as he had hoped—Congress reduced the consular emoluments during his tenure—he nonetheless managed to accumulate a capital of some $30,000, the interest on which would provide for his family and allow him to travel for a year in Italy. Hawthorne resigned his office as of 31 August 1857, but he had to wait until his replacement arrived and his accounts were settled. In January 1858, he left for the continent, where he spent two winters in Rome and the intervening summer in Florence.

Hawthorne's experience abroad was quite different from Cooper's. Less concerned with the political and social contrast between the United States and the countries of Europe, Hawthorne was first struck by the age of the churches and cathedrals he saw in England. He was even more impressed with the vastly greater antiquity of what he found in Rome. There time stretched back not only to the Middle Ages, but to the Empire, beyond that to the Republic and the period of the kings, and further still until it faded into the dim antiquity of Etruria. Hawthorne had always been fascinated with the influence of the past, and he found in Rome much food for thought. At times he wished that the relics of previous generations could be swept away to let mankind embark on a future unencumbered by the influence of time. He knew, of course, that the past could not be so easily disposed of—even in the United States, which, in its newness, had so brief a history. Faced with this reality, he explored instead the effects of time on the present: on the modern Italians who lived amid its ruins, and
on American visitors, who, like himself, were forced by their presence in Europe to confront the lessons of history.

The ruins he saw around him bespoke the sin and suffering, the remorse and sorrow that had afflicted the human race for untold centuries, a dismal history that his countrymen had not yet experienced in their new world. Hawthorne was struck by the contrast between Italy and the United States, the one drenched in time, the other concerned with the commonplace realities of the moment, and while he was still in Europe, he wrote a romance, *The Marble Faun* (1860), which probes deeply into the moral natures of those who are the products of such widely different cultures. Hawthorne filled his book with the art, architecture, history, legend, and myth that he had discovered in Italy, sometimes including almost verbatim descriptions of objects and places from his Italian notebooks, passages that he had written while the things themselves were still fresh in his mind. A sense of the dead past broods over the novel. Rome itself is a vast decaying corpse buried beneath the detritus that has been accumulating for centuries, and all time from the sylvan age of Etruria to the filth and decay of modern Rome is present at once to the senses.

Into this setting, Hawthorne introduces four characters, two European and two American. Donatello, the Count of Monte Beni, is a young Italian who so resembles the Faun of Praxiteles that his friends half-fancifully suppose him descended from one of those sylvan creatures of the Golden Age. In truth, Donatello justifies the supposition in that he lives an instinctive, almost animal-like life. He has a youthful gaiety and simplicity of mind that bespeak his innocence, but he is as a consequence deficient in those qualities of mind and heart that are most truly human. He is in love with Miriam, a painter who has some undisclosed mystery in her past and who considers him something of a simpleton, with less than a man's share of wit. She, in turn, is constantly shadowed by a strange man—perhaps mad, perhaps demonic—who belongs to her past and who seems to possess some power over her. So distraught does Miriam become because of his persecution, that one night when they appear to be alone, Donatello, with animal ferocity, seizes the man, reads a flash of consent in Miriam's eyes, and flings him to his death from the Tarpeian Rock.

The crime has a complex effect on these characters. They first feel a wild elation to be freed from the shadow, but the following
day they sink under the enormity of what they have done. Thereafter, each changes markedly. Miriam is awakened to love for Donatello, who at first rejects her and retires to his ancestral tower to come to grips with his guilt. There he begins to develop new depths of mind and heart which no one could have expected him to be capable of. He had caught a glimpse, Hawthorne writes, "of strange and subtile matters in those dark caverns, into which all men must descend, if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasures of existence. And when they emerge, . . . they take truer and sadder views of life, forever afterwards." In those shadowy depths, the Faun finds a soul. He and Miriam are eventually brought together for a brief interlude of happiness, but Donatello at last puts himself into the hands of the Roman police to take his punishment for the murder. In accepting the consequences of what he has done, Donatello becomes fully human.

The role that the Americans play in this moral drama is very different. Kenyon, a sculptor, and Hilda, a copyist, are Miriam's best friends, but both fail her in her moments of greatest need. The day before the murder, Miriam visits Kenyon's studio to see his statue of Cleopatra, the execution of which induces her to believe that he understands women and can sympathize with the trouble that afflicts her. She reveals that her heart holds a secret which tortures her so severely that she fears she will go mad or die of it, and she asks him to let her speak. Kenyon's response, though "perfectly frank and kind," contains nonetheless a "reserve and alarm" that Miriam quickly detects. She reads a perhaps unconscious suspicion in his eyes and realizes that he is "as cold and pitiless as [his] own marble" (128-29). Long after the murder, when Miriam does indeed reveal her story, Kenyon suggests that she should have told her friends sooner. Miriam reminds him of the incident in his studio and the coldness with which he had repulsed her. But for that, she believes, "all would have turned out differently" (433).

Hilda's role in the drama is even more revealing. Quite inadvertently and unbeknown to Miriam and Donatello, she happens to witness the murder and even catches the look in Miriam's eyes by which she gives her consent to the crime. Hilda is understandably shocked by what they have done, and she spends a miserable night in her knowledge of it. But the following morning when the now desolate Miriam comes to her for support,
Hilda rejects her utterly. Miriam confesses her guilt. She has sinned against God and man. She pleads therefore with Hilda to be the more her friend, because she needs her more. Hilda is adamant. She refuses even to touch the unfortunate woman and cuts herself off entirely from her erstwhile friend. Completely unaware of her cruelty, Hilda believes she is acting in a completely moral fashion when she rejects the sinner with the sin. If Kenyon is cold, Hilda is merciless, and both are lacking in the essential elements of humanity. They lack compassion. They have no charity. They are Miriam's closest friends, yet they fail to support her when she is most in need.

Both Kenyon and Hilda are eventually somewhat softened by the tragedy, but American to the core, they take a simplistic view of its significance. That sin and sorrow have left their marks on Miriam and Donatello is clear enough, but both have also gained from the experience. Miriam feels a depth of love that she would not otherwise have known, and Donatello becomes a man. Yet when Kenyon suggests to Hilda that good and evil may be intertwined in even a criminal act and that its consequences may be salutary as well as damaging, she strenuously objects. Hilda will admit no grays in her black and white vision of reality. Later, when Kenyon, prompted by Miriam, also broaches the subject of the Fortunate Fall—that sin, like sorrow, is "merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained" (460)—Hilda shrinks in horror at the suggestion and even berates Kenyon for having advanced it. Kenyon capitulates at once. He surrenders to the young girl's sense of right and wrong, and the two turn their backs on Italy to immerse themselves in the far simpler moral environment of their native country.

By drawing so strong a contrast between his European and American characters, Hawthorne makes plain his criticism of the moral understanding of his countrymen, without a sense of the past and the struggle through which the human race has gone; they have little awareness of the depths to which they can sink or the heights to which they can rise. Worse, when confronted with moral complexity, they take refuge in their New World sense of reality and fail to see so deeply as their European counterparts into the mystery of good and evil. Hawthorne learned much about Americans during his seven years abroad. He understood—and in many ways admired—the innocence and naive idealism that they
derived from their native culture, but he knew that their optimism was bought at the high price of a failure in human understanding. Hawthorne himself returned to America in 1860, and although he tried to write another romance in the scant four years of life that were left to him, all of his attempts were abortive. *The Marble Faun* is his last work of fiction. It contains his most mature thought on the American character.

III

Henry James called it "a complex fate, being an American" and devoted much of his creative energy to its critical examination. He was well equipped to do so. Though most of his formative years were spent in the United States, early and extended visits to Europe also made him very much at home there, and by 1876, when he was thirty-three, he was spending most of his time abroad, where he supported himself by his writing. After 1883, he resided there permanently and did not return to the United States until his ten-months' tour of the country in 1904-1905. Yet expatriate though he certainly was, James remained as much an American as Cooper and Hawthorne, and, like them, he used his experience abroad to explore the American character. In book after book, from *Roderick Hudson* (1875) to *The American Scene* (1907), he brought it under intense study and left a body of work unparalleled in its probing of what it means to be an American. Much, of course, had changed in the United States since Cooper and Hawthorne had written. The Civil War had occurred, and American society had undergone a profound transformation. James was working under very different circumstances, but the relation of his books to theirs is nonetheless clear.

Fenimore Cooper, writing in the 1830s and 1840s, had perceived that the gentlemanly values of the early republic were threatened by the rise of a commercial class whose sole claim to distinction would be the possession of money. James, writing after the Civil War, records their triumph. In James's world, they have become the typical American, and he highlights their characteristics by placing them in a European environment. There is Christopher Newman, in *The American* (1877), a man of enterprise whose "sole aim in life had been to make money," who succeeded in amassing millions, and who, on his sojourn in Europe, would like to acquire a titled wife. There is Caspar Goodwood, in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), an intense, aggressive New England manufacturer.
who likes “to organise, to contend, to administer” and who can “make people work his will.” There is, above all, Chad Newsome, in *The Ambassadors* (1903), the scion of a New England family who, while in Europe, has an affair with a beautiful and cultured French woman, Madame de Vionnet, but who, when offered the opportunity to return home and take over the family business, deserts her for the prospect of making a great deal of money through the use of advertising.

James also follows Hawthorne in his concern with the innocence and moral rigidity of the American character, qualities that Hawthorne had embodied in Hilda in *The Marble Faun*. James’s use of American innocents from Daisy Miller and Christopher Newman during the 1870s to Lambert Strether and Milly Theale in the novels of his major phase is, of course, well known, but he also treats the American tendency to see moral questions in terms of blacks and whites. Chad Newsome, in *The Ambassadors*, has been much improved as a man by his affair with Madame de Vionnet, and he is quick to admit, even when he is on the point of deserting her, that he owes her everything. Sarah Pocock, however, Chad’s married sister, can perceive only the adulterous relation, is harsh in her judgment of Madame de Vionnet, and refuses to admit that Chad has received any benefit from her. She even considers the change in Chad “hideous.” Like Hilda, Sarah Pocock is lacking in charity. She will not admit that good and evil can somehow be intermixed, and she will return to New England, like Hilda, confirmed in her own self-righteousness.

But James included one element not emphasized by Cooper and Hawthorne—the American expatriates living for extended periods, if not permanently, in Europe. They form a special class in his fiction, and although they differ among themselves, they reveal what happens to the American when he strays from his native soil. Winterbourne, in *Daisy Miller* (1878), for example, has lived so long abroad that he can no longer understand or appreciate the innocence of the American girl, and he makes the mistake, like his aunt, Mrs. Costello, and his friend, Mrs. Walker, of reading her defiance of social form as moral turpitude. Mrs. Walker in particular is downright cruel in her treatment of the girl. Other characters go even further in becoming Europeanized. Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, have become as polished in form, and as corrupt and duplicitous, as the Europeans among whom they live. None of these or the other
expatriates in James’s fiction ceases to be American, but most of them seem to lose their native innocence as they acquire the manners and polish of their European hosts. They are people caught between two worlds who belong fully to neither.

Yet for all his treatment of Americans in Europe, James is perhaps most interesting for the observations he made, when, after long years abroad, he toured the United States for the better part of a year in 1904-1905. James’s motives for making the trip were mixed. He wanted to arrange for the publication of a collected edition of his works, but he was also filled with nostalgia for his native land, and, at sixty-one, he wanted to see it again while he was still able to do so. James had been absent for twenty-one years when he landed at Hoboken, New Jersey, on 30 August 1904, and America had become as romantic for him as Europe had been in his youth. He revisited, of course, the familiar New York and Boston, traveled to Philadelphia and Washington, and made a short trip into the south, where he visited Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, and the east coast of Florida. These experiences he recorded in The American Scene (1907). James also crossed the midwest to St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Chicago, and he even made the long passage to California, Oregon, and Washington. He intended to publish a second book on this part of his trip, but it was, unfortunately, never written.

James’s impressions of America are, for our purposes, especially significant because they were recorded, not by a European, but by an American with long experience abroad. For despite his many years in Europe, James remained very much a native son. As Minnie Bourget, the wife of the French writer, wrote to Edith Wharton, who had “discovered ‘the compatriot’ in James—‘he loves his country, perhaps even when he does not know himself to what extent.’” If the reader today should have any doubt of this judgment, let him turn to The American Scene and read James’s account of his visit to Concord, Massachusetts, with its associations of the American Revolution and of Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Emerson; or his description of Independence Hall in Philadelphia as “an ‘important’ concrete illustration” of “our historic past;” or his allusions to the Civil War, which had had so deep and lasting an effect on Americans of his generation, whether they fought, or, like him, did not fight, in that conflict. James’s historical associations are those of any patriotic American, then or now. If he is highly critical of the United States, his...
opinions are worth the more because, like those of Cooper and Hawthorne, they come from one of our own.

James was deeply struck by the transience of things in America, a fact that was brought home to him as he sought mementos of his past. The house in which he was born near Washington Square in New York had already been razed to make way for a “high, square, impersonal structure” (91) like so many other ugly new buildings in the city. And although he did find the house in which he had lived on Beacon Hill in Boston, his pleasure at the discovery was short lived. When he returned a month later to see it again, he “found but a gaping void, the brutal effacement, at a stroke, of every related object, of the whole precious past” (229). Americans seemed to build only to tear down and build again. Yet the new graceless towers were no more permanent than what they replaced. “Crowned not only with no history,” James observed, “but with no credible possibility of time for history, and consecrated by no uses save the commercial at any cost, they are simply the most piercing notes in that concert of the expensively provisional into which your supreme sense of New York resolves itself. . . . sky-scrapers are the last word of economic ingenuity only till another word be written” (77).

As this passage so clearly indicates, James was well aware that the driving force behind the compulsion for change was the pursuit of money, and he saw its baleful effects everywhere. It destroyed the past, blighted the present, and made social life as he knew it in Europe impossible. James lamented the ravage that had been made in the land, and though he granted the peace and prosperity of American society, it impressed him also as being “too vague and, above all, too uniform.” The men were absorbed in business to the exclusion of all other human relations, and the women were merely “the indulged ladies of such lords.” When one had noted their success, their “great gregarious decency and sociability and good-humour, one had exhausted the list.” James knew, of course, that he was dealing only with the privileged few in his criticism of this American type, but they are the ones—as Cooper would have agreed—who give direction and tone to the society. And the image they projected was that of a bland respectability which “might have been figured by a great grey wash of some charged moist brush causing colour and outline, on the pictured paper, effectually to run together” (454-55).

But James was not only concerned with the American elite. He
was also fascinated by the hordes of immigrants who passed through Ellis Island—a place he visited—and whose presence was everywhere apparent in New York. He observed the change that took place in these aliens when they arrived in America: the loss of any relation with the more privileged classes that would have been taken for granted in Europe, and the shedding, among the Italians, of the colorful characteristics which they had exhibited in their native country. James observed them as they rode the street cars and was struck by the fact that alien though they might appear to be, “they were at home, really more at home, at the end of their few weeks or months or their year or two, than they had ever in their lives been before; and that he was at home too, quite with the same intensity,” an “equality of condition” between the alien and the expatriate that made the relation seem so strange to him (125). The mere arrival in America wrought a change in the immigrant so profound that he could no longer see himself, or be seen by others, as what he had once been.

But that was only the half of it. If America transformed the aliens, what effect would they have on the country of their adoption? The immigrants came from such diverse backgrounds, spoke such different languages, and clustered so together in ethnic neighborhoods, that James could only wonder what the result of so massive an influx of people like these might be. He recognized that the school and the press were powerful forces for assimilation. Though the immigrants themselves might not share in the common brotherhood of Americans, their children certainly should. But that did not answer the question on James’s mind. To consider the many elements that were being mixed in the cauldron of the American character was to speculate on what that character might eventually become. “What type,” he asked, “is to be conceived as shaping itself” from “such a prodigious amalgam, such a hotchpotch of racial ingredients?” James could not answer the question, nor did he want to. He found his solution to the problem, not in the need for conclusions, but “rather in that blest general feeling for the impossibility of them, to which the philosophy of any really fine observation of the American spectacle must reduce itself” (121).

IV

But if James could not foresee what the American character might become, he could depict it as he observed it in the
present—and do it the more effectively because, like Cooper and Hawthorne before him, he was a patriotic American whose experience abroad gave him the opportunity to view his countrymen, as it were, from the outside. Indeed, the very success of these three men in presenting unflattering pictures of the American character may stand in the way of a just appreciation of the soundness of their judgments. Though Cooper is admired for his Leatherstocking tales, his social criticism has been anything but popular; *The Marble Faun* is the least understood and admired of Hawthorne’s major romances; and as early as *Daisy Miller* and as late as *The Ambassadors*, James was criticized for his American books. His depiction of Daisy was considered by some a libel on American womanhood, and his treatment of the adulterous relation between Chad Newsome and Madame de Vionnet drew critical fire. Indeed, *The American Scene*, as fine an analysis of our society as has ever been written, is not as well known as it should be. Americans, it would seem, cannot tolerate criticism.

We much prefer the image of ourselves projected through the prism of the frontier. According to this myth, we are independent, self-reliant, democratic, contemptuous of authority, free—qualities on which we like to pride ourselves. We need to be reminded, therefore, of the dark side of the frontier: the violence, greed, waste, and despoliation of the landscape—elements that help to account for some of what Cooper and James, at least, were most critical of in American life. I have no quarrel with either of these views of the western experience, for each contains a great deal of truth. But let us also recall the fact that, while many Americans were moving west, some of their compatriots turned back toward Europe, and because of their long sojourns there, were able to view their fellow countrymen with fresh eyes to perceive that, despite their virtues, they also had serious failings. Such opinions may not have been well received in their own time, but surely we, at the end of the twentieth century, should have acquired sophistication enough to heed their criticism of the American character, even when—perhaps especially when—it is least to our liking.
NOTES


