

Sense of the West: When Henry James Visited California

Philip Horne

Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907), a highly idiosyncratic record of his trip to America in 1904-5, his first return to his homeland in 21 years, is an extraordinary book – Auden called it ‘a prose poem of the first order’. James declared, ‘I would take my stand on my gathered impressions’ – and surveys the history and prospects of civilization in Teddy Roosevelt’s America in a series of dramatised meditations on the built environment, the power of corporations, immigration, manners, education, language – all seen as ‘something new under the sun’. This dizzying, immensely suggestive work, however, hailed by some as an early triumph of cultural criticism, gets no further west than Florida – and many readers probably assume James didn’t either, if they think about it at all.

In fact, though, the archives show, James’s travels hadn’t stopped there: early in 1905, he crossed the Midwest to the West Coast. And stopping with Florida wasn’t James’s plan for *The American Scene* when he wrote to D.A. Munro of Harper’s on 26 September 1905:

What I *shall* send you will be more or less exactly the following.

Boston, Salem, Concord etc.

Philadelphia and Washington.

Baltimore and the South.

The Middle West: an Impression.

California and the Pacific Coast.

The Universities and Colleges: a Impression. (not elsewhere workable-in.)

Manners: an Impression (not workable-in elsewhere)

In the event, ‘Boston’, ‘Concord and Salem’, ‘Philadelphia’, ‘Washington’, ‘Baltimore’, ‘Richmond’, ‘Charleston’ and ‘Florida’ all took separate chapters – leaving everything after ‘Florida’ to wait.

At some point that autumn James decided to write a second volume. He remarked to his friend Morton Fullerton on 2 December 1905 that ‘now it appears that I shall have uncannily hived enough acrid honey to make, probably, a couple of books (of social notes &c) – instead of the scant *one* I had very timidly planned.’ And he told his agent Pinker on 5 December that ‘I should be willing... to call the second book “The Sense of the West;” which is a name that might also do for the first, were it not that the second then remains in the background awaiting its ticket, and that the S. of the W. is better for it than for its predecessor’.

James never published anything of significance about the West Coast or the Mid-West, and never fulfilled his later promise to Fullerton on 8 August 1907, implying some fictional use: ‘I *have* a great many other & *inédites* Impressions – but shall have to use them in some other & “indirect” way’. But we can catch some glints of the missing pendant – of ‘California and the Pacific Coast’ in particular – if we attend to James’s unobtrusive arrival on the West Coast late on Thursday 23 March 1905, boldly announced two days later by the *Los Angeles Times*:

Henry James Here.

Well-Known Novelist, Alone, Slips Quietly into Apartments at the Van Nuys.

On the morning of Friday the 24th, from this hotel in downtown L.A., described in the *L.A. Herald* that year as ‘especially designed for a first-class patronage’, James told his sister-in-law Alice, wife of William James, back in Cambridge, that California was a tonic after the ‘unspeakable alkali deserts, in which... I almost broke down

from tension, sickness & weariness.’ But, he went on, ‘I have now (9.45 a.m.) after a night in a clean bed, the sense of being in California, & though it seems as yet less exotic & romantic than I hoped, it is clearly very amusing & different, quite amiably & unexpectedly *gay* – quite another than the eastern note – & even in the large bustling hall of this (very excellent) hotel, where I write, intimations of *climate*, of a highly seductive order, are wafted in upon me. I presently go forth to assist, I trust, at their development, & at that of other pleasing phenomena. The light, in particular, seems most elegant & *soignée*...’

Late on Saturday, 25 March, James wrote to Jocelyn Persse in England: ‘this extraordinary California, at the end of the awful dusty grind, this great blooming *garden-realm*, enclosed between the grand mountains & the Pacific, is, so far as Nature goes, a fair reward for the pilgrimage.’ On this day, James tells Persse, he has made ‘an excursion down to the sea (from which this is 20 miles distant,)’ and speaks of ‘taking in a first impression of the great green Pacific’, with ‘its long rollers & the iri[descence] of the great violet mountains’, then ‘coming back’ through ‘golden orange groves.’ James praises the flowers of the region: ‘flowers splendid and huge beyond any flowers one has seen elsewhere. Everything is larger, intenser, braver, with a kind of conscious insolence of success; everything makes, in contrast, our (or at least *my*,) poor little English gardening a meagre, dusky show. And it’s an extraordinary country this (California) for manners & human forms, evidently, too; I am curious to see more of it, & I shall have more to tell you.’

By Wednesday 5 April 1905, having left L.A. temporarily for San Diego and the Hotel del Coronado, James could write to his sister-in-law Alice: ‘It breaks my heart to have so stinted myself here – but it was inevitable, and no one had given me the least inkling that I should find California so sympathetic. It is strange and inconvenient, how little impression of anything any one ever takes the trouble to give one beforehand. I should like to stay here all April and May.’ He was booked to

lecture in New York on 27 April; if he *had* stayed longer, perhaps we would have his missing ‘California’.

Still, we can catch the tip of its tail if we go down to the ‘large bustling hall’ of the Van Nuys on the evening of Saturday 25 March. An unnamed journalist from the *LA Times* found James there in a genial but dominating mood. He or she got a kind of scoop – an interview of sorts, which hasn’t been noted by Jamesian scholars. The headline in the *Times* next day was ‘REAL HENRY JAMES, HE REALLY SAID IT’ – meaning, I think, that other papers were misreporting and inventing quotations, as they definitely did during James’s tour. The L.A. reporter tells us that ‘Mr. James objects to being interviewed; he does not object to interviewing on his own account.’ So she or he begins, ‘Well, Mr. James, you might tell us what—’ only to be interrupted by the subject: ‘Tell me, how long has the grass been green in Southern California? Since January? Indeed?—and how long will the green last? Well, then does it fade quickly away—suddenly—leaving a desert desolation? No? You have a brown tinge over all the country in the summer, I suppose, and that must be beautiful in a way too, in its various shadings.’ Unlike some things James is reported as saying in the U.S. papers, this sounds, with its self-revising and amplifications, as if it’s at least based on the Master’s voice.

The reporter tries again. ‘What is your impression of Southern California, and what do you think of the prospects for—’ James can’t be stopped: ‘Nonsense! Nonsense! A man can’t tell what he thinks of a country in two days; he doesn’t know anything, he hasn’t found out anything—I haven’t. I’ve been around the outlying country—I’ve taken the obvious trips—to the foothills yesterday—to the ocean today—and Southern California seems to me a country of possibilities. What it will be when water runs over it, when irrigation touches everything, the mind cannot contemplate. Today it looks like England, only England on a vaster scale, with gigantic mountain ranges and vast green plains, bordered by orchards of an immensity that England

never knew.’ James seems to have a visionary sense of the place and its potential – and of the importance of water. This interview-in-reverse ends with James declaring – sincerely or not, who can say? – ‘What—really! I see an old friend over there by the café. You’ll pardon me, I’m sure!’ It’s the close of the piece: ‘And with that Henry James, assuming a wearied gait, took his way across the lobby floor.’

This may have been merely a ploy to escape, but it’s probable that the ‘old friend’ he claims to spot here was someone he’d just spent the day with, son of an American writer James deeply admired. In the *Henry James Review* in 2011 Gary Scharnhorst recorded his discovery that ‘Julian Hawthorne published a long interview with James in the *Los Angeles Examiner* for March 27 [1905] and in the *New York American* the following day’. The interview, recounting a trip ‘to the ocean’, was entitled ‘Julian Hawthorne Renews Friendship and Sees Los Angeles with Henry James’; and indeed starts with Hawthorne saying they had met by chance ‘in the least reposeful spot of a bustling and noisy city—the lobby of a hotel’. James had known Hawthorne Jr., a rather desperate and unsuccessful writer and journalist for both Pulitzer and Hearst, for many decades, and yet there is a mystery here, for in 1886 James’s estimation of Hawthorne stock had taken a fresh and seemingly irremediable tumble.

Hawthorne had spent a day with the poet James Russell Lowell in October 1886, then written it up as an indiscreet interview in the *New York World* – reporting the ex-Ambassador as calling the Prince of Wales ‘immensely fat’, for example, and causing much embarrassment. Lowell immediately denied any awareness that he was *being* interviewed. James declared he could ‘imagine no more infamous trick & no more shameless piece of caddishness... It shows how dangerous & noxious a man may become when he is so discredited (as J. H. has been, I take it, for a long time,) that he has no further credit to lose.’ The great writer’s son ‘ought to be shot & that is the end of it.’ The incident partly inspired James’s short 1888 satirical novel on the

abuses of the press, *The Reverberator* (Richard Salmon's Cambridge edition of which is due out later this year).

So why James was now prepared to spend a day with, rather than shoot, this pariah – whom he had called (to his brother William) ‘the basest cad unflogged’ – remains obscure – a day that was indeed then, characteristically, written up and published as an interview. James may have been embarrassed about snubbing him; he may have felt pity for a man down on his luck; he may have wanted a guide who knew the city (newspapers report Hawthorne as there since at least January) – or just company.

Anyhow, James commented to his Boswell-for-the-day on the grandeur of nature in America and the ugliness of human civilisation:

‘I came out here—I wanted to see the country,’ he continued. ‘The great plains, the grand country east of the Rocky mountains, those I enjoyed; and this country, the natural features are beautiful, but—the ugliness of what man has done! And some person who lives here was saying to me today that Los Angeles was the most beautiful city IN THE WORLD!’ He regarded me with a certain consternation.

They are downtown; James wants to go as far West as possible.

It presently appeared that he had not been down to the beach, and “I want to see the Pacific,” he said, and suggested that I accompany him thither. We took an electric car and went thundering down across the wide meadows, and while we talked nothing in the landscape escaped him. At last we turned a corner. “There is the Pacific,” I said. He looked quickly round and gazed, and his arms lifted. It was a very pleasant moment for me; I knew how he felt.

“As when stout Cortez!” he murmured, after a moment. “I will be stout Cortez for the time!”

Hawthorne may not be appreciating the significance for James of the Cortez lines, from Keats’s ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’, in the recently-published *Golden Bowl* – where the American millionaire Adam Verver metaphorically compares his discovery of culture to ‘stout Cortez in the presence of the Pacific’. Anyway, now stout James ‘star’d at’ what had hitherto been for him just a metaphor – with some ‘wild surmise’ we’ll never know. Disembarking from the tram,

We got out and walked along the shore. The tide was high but he wished to get down on the sands and we plowed our way along happily. “The light through those waves, just before they break!” he murmured, pausing to gaze. “Those gulls—how tame! The grace of those children bathing!” As we walked the light haze which partially veiled the sea cleared away and the strong blue line of the horizon became distinct. Ah, he was delighted. But he glanced somewhat painfully at the little bungalows crowding down to the shore. He gazed off at the ocean toward the west. Again and again he stopped, absorbing this feature of the scene or that.

This is a further horizon than we’re used to thinking of James’s gaze as resting on. After which Hawthorne notes that ‘We lunched at Playa del Rey on a bowl of soup and a piece of pumpkin pie which James, I think, ate from some patriotic motive; they have no pumpkin pies in Rye.’ But, predictably, some of the things Hawthorne printed – particularly his words about meeting President Roosevelt, that ‘I wasn’t attracted to him. I had had some prejudice against him since the Cuban war – which I hated’ – did make James, yet again, the object of U.S. press hostility.

These fascinating glimpses of James in L.A. must stand for the unwritten chapters – the missing book – that would have treated the West. But we can follow the projected volume in his letters, including one from Lamb House, Rye, to Elizabeth Jordan, editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, on 5 March 1907 – nearly two years after he left the West Coast. She had proposed he make a little book of *The Speech and Manners of American Women* papers he was writing, after *The American Scene*, for the magazine. Adapting an earlier plan for the sequel outlined to his agent J.B. Pinker on 27 June 1906 – consisting of half ‘Speech, Manners, Forms & cognate matters’ and half of ‘the rest of my other *local* Impressions’ – he wanted to amplify it with further Western sketches.

I made no reply to your interesting inquiry, on behalf of the House [Harper], as to the idea of a pretty little *Book* formed by the eight Manners & Speech articles in the ‘Bazaar’... But I have since had more freedom to think of the matter, & shld. be very glad [to] have the small Book put forth – if you will say so to the House, for me – but with a modification that I desire to propose; or rather, as I should call it, an extension. The Book wd. be very small... I have still a good many other American notes & impressions unused, & if you would care for a further series in the Bazaar of papers of the same length – say even six or eight – I should greatly like to undertake *that* little job. I am thinking of special episodes, pictures, vignettes – such e.g. as my little visit to Notre Dame Indiana, another to Smith College Northampton Mass., another to Indianapolis itself, another to the coeducative Berkeley Cal.[,] another to that extraordinary place Point Loma, Southern California, the neo-Bhuddist [sic] (educational) paradise of the amazing lady who runs it, (Mrs. Tingley) & who ‘runs’ Mrs. [Mary Baker] Eddy, in a manner, ‘so close’; together with other matters of a similar sort mainly western – a wonderful school at St. Louis which gave me much to think &c. I shld. like to “do” these things – they would have a harmony & I

think I could make the little vignettes & so forth of them – of 3,500 words – have a charm. The result would be a more graceful as well as a more substantial little book; & one I could then (the other things *with* the 8 you already have) consider the issue of here as well. When I think of the Pacific Coast, of San Francisco before the convulsion &c, of Coronado & Seattle & various other bits, I think I could certainly undertake *eight*. Should you care for these? If so I will set to work at them as soon as I come back from a short little trip to the continent for which I start tomorrow.

However, even before the ‘second book’ idea, back home in Rye only a few months, James had already told his niece Peggy on 3 November 1905 he was ‘squeezing out my American Book with all desirable deliberation, and yet in a kind of panting dread of the matter of it all melting and fading from me before I have worked it off. It does melt and fade, over here, in the strangest way.’ James was moreover so preoccupied with other projects, including his monumental New York Edition, with its revisions and Prefaces, that he only sent off ‘Florida’, the final chapter of *The American Scene*, on 27 September 1906.

And when Elizabeth Jordan’s reply to the offer of six or eight more *Harper’s Bazaar* papers came, as James summarises it on 3 May 1907, it was ‘that the Bazaar wld. find use for three if they should take the form of being specifically addressed to Women. This I well understand to be your necessity.’ James admits, ‘I am not sure, either, that I shall be quite *able* to give them that complexion in an adequate degree – though again, with a swing of the pendulum, I remember that I mostly *feel* myself able to do anything I sufficiently try.’ But he evidently *didn’t* find his writing about place so easy to give this compulsory gendered turn, and by 22 June 1907, writing from the Palazzo Barbaro in Venice, to Mrs Humphry Ward who was praising *The*

American Scene, James confesses that ‘a projected sequel has proved so difficult that I find I have given it up altogether.’

We can, at least, perhaps identify the germ of a putative California chapter in *The American Scene* itself, where in a moment of prolepsis Florida is unfavourably compared with California: Florida collapses when one asks for more than ‘oranges, grapefruit and velvet air’.

California was to have—if I may decently be premature about it—her own treachery; but she was to wind one up much higher before she let one down. I was to find her, especially at the first flush, unlike sweet frustrated Florida, ever so amiably strong: which came from the art with which she makes the stoutnesses, as I have called them, of natural beauty stand you in temporary stead of the leannesses of everything else (everything that might be of an order equally interesting). This she is on a short acquaintance quite insolently able to do, thanks to her belonging so completely to the “handsome” side of the continent, of which she is the finest expression. The aspect of natural objects, up and down the Pacific coast, is as “aristocratic” as the comprehensive American condition permits anything to be: it indeed appears to the ingenious mind to represent an instinct on the part of Nature, a sort of shuddering, bristling need, to brace herself in advance against the assault of a society so much less marked with distinction than herself.

As he had written to Alice H. James on 13 April 1905, ‘the natural (not “social”) “swagger” of California continues to charm me’. The hint in ‘not “social”’ suggests that it is perhaps on the social side that ‘California was to have... her own treachery’, not just of the Julian Hawthorne kind, in a way that might have provided the critical edge in the missing chapter.

The loss of it is frustrating. Fanny Kemble's daughter Sarah Wister saw James after his return East, and on 12 May 1905 reported, tantalisingly for us, to her son Owen Wister (author of *The Virginian*) that 'He looked tired and almost shabby as to attire; I think he will have a great deal that is interesting & eloquent to say about California.' But, rather than dwelling on what we will never have, let us end with what is perhaps the most vividly responsive passage from James's letters in California, on 5 April 1905 from Coronado Beach to Alice in the East: a passage developing his main idea – of the overwhelming richness of the State's nature but the vacuity, so far, of its culture:

California, on these terms, when all is said (Southern C. at least – which, however, the real C., I believe, much repudiates), has completely bowled me over – such a delicious difference from the rest of the U.S. do I find in it. (I speak of course all of nature and climate, fruits and flowers; for there is absolutely nothing else, and the sense of the shining social and human inane is utter.) The days have been mostly here of heavenly beauty, and the flowers, the wild flowers just now in particular, which fairly *rage*, with radiance, over the land, are worthy of some purer planet than this. I live on oranges and olives, fresh from the tree, and I lie awake nights to listen, on purpose, to the languid lisp of the Pacific, which my windows overhang....

Philip Horne has edited Henry James: Autobiographies (Library of America, 2016); and Tales from a Master's Notebook: Stories Henry James Never Wrote (Vintage, 2018).