

## ***The Devil in Mr James: Loving and Hating the “Major Phase”***

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*Did he not feel, did he not perceive that he was drifting very far from the world of “reality,” from the common earth to which, to renew his strength, the artist like Antaeus, must ever return? (Van Wyck Brooks, The Pilgrimage of Henry James, 124)*

The opening remark of Philip Rahv’s “Attitudes Toward Henry James” (1943) sums up James’ peculiar standing amongst readers and critics alike:

Henry James is at once the most and least appreciated figure in American writing. (Rahv 95)

Surprisingly, though, considerable illumination is to be had not from James’ devotees, but from his most ardent critics. Van Wyck Brooks, for example, describes James’ enterprise as: “[m]agnificent pretensions, petty performances!—the fruits of an irresponsible imagination, of a deranged sense of values, of a mind working in a void, uncorrected by any clear consciousness of human cause and effect” (qtd. in Rahv 97). Despite their Protestant zeal, Brooks’ remarks are most telling. They rather beautifully capture James’ later “extra-terrestrial” prose as well as his indifference to what Brooks calls “human cause and effect.” Nor could F. R. Leavis comprehend what appeared to him as James’ later descent into moral and formal chaos. André Gide complained of a certain detachment in James and begrudged that his characters just about evaporate in a metaphysical haze of all but contentless relations; while Ford Madox Ford in *Henry James: A Critical Study*, on a more favourable note, calls James the most impersonal and unhelpful author he has ever known.

This paper enlists James’ critics to explain what I feel are James’ most salient—and best—features. I read James positively as a writer whose “impersonality” and “unreality” are precisely the hallmarks of his unique brand of prose, and most significantly the foundation of his unique ethics, which Dorothy Hale has called the “appreciation of alterity.” I begin by tracing impersonality in *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ambassadors* and continue with the profound dehumanization that governs *The American Scene*. I argue that James’ so-called “social novels” reveal an impersonality at the very heart of the social relation itself, an impersonality which is radically extended in *The American Scene*’s problematic dehumanization of immigrants, in particular its depiction of Jews.

Dehumanization profoundly affects how characters interact with one another in the later novels, their impersonal love for one another, as it were; but it also significantly determines our own mode of relation to the Jamesian text, our inability to simply identify with or feel for the characters in any conventionally novelistic manner. Such dehumanization, I want to show, functions positively by imposing its own mode of appreciation and love, both between the fictional characters in the novels, and on the real readers without.

## **Hate's Rebate, Or Love's Largesse: Back to Back on "The Bench of Desolation"**

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"Love turns, with a little indulgence, to indifference or disgust, hatred alone is immortal" claims William Hazlitt, and James, in his short story, "The Bench of Desolation," would seem to agree. At the very least, hatred appears to give a much better "return" than love, as Herbert Dodd soon discovers.

In this tale, Kate Cookham extracts the enormous sum of Two Hundred and Seventy pounds from Herbert Dodd who has reneged on his promise of marriage just days after first meeting the winsome Nan Drury (although in Dodd's own recall of events, his "letter of withdrawal" came, significantly for his own "straightness," a crucial few days before). Ten years later, following the death of Nan and their two little daughters, the collapse of Dodd's book-selling business (directly linked to Kate's outrageous demand), and Dodd's own unresisting "submersion" into financial and social ruin, Kate unexpectedly returns, bearing the fruits of her investment of Dodd's money, which she proposes to give back, with interest, to the tune of 1260 pounds.

The tale describes at some length how Herbert has lived all his life in the shadow of the great "atrocious" Kate Cookham performed on him so many years ago. Yet his hatred of Kate is just a mask for his own deeply buried guilt at having emotionally and morally betrayed her. Kate's hatred, on the other hand, is something pure and for this reason can be put into circulation and generate returns: "Everything was possible, under my stress, with my hatred," she tells Dodd. "It made me think of everything. It made me work."

In this paper, I examine the two forms of hatred, one of which is productive (and therefore "backs" onto love) while the other is merely the destructive off-shoot of shame. I will suggest, with Hazlitt, that the "immortality" of the first form of hatred is directly connected to its ability to be put to work, while the other can offer nothing but the self-consuming cycle of despair and desolation.

## **“Hatred of the Other Man” and the Limits of an Aesthetic Ethics in *The Ambassadors***

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The play of cultural, temperamental antipathies and empathetic identifications or incorporations that James explores throughout his career in “the international theme” may be seen as recurrent meditations upon the social-psychological phenomena that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes as “hatred of the other man,” hatred of another because she or he *is* other, because he or she is construed as the essence of Otherness, awakening an almost physiological “allergy” to the other. While Levinas, a survivor of the Holocaust, identifies anti-Semitism as the ideal type of “hatred of the other man,” James delineates its contours in his investigations of European-American interactions culminating in the chillingly abstract hatred with which Mrs. Newsome and Mrs. Pocock view Madame de Vionnet. As Levinas suggests, such hatred manifests the collusion of biology and ideology. The imperative to protect one’s own, to secure the flourishing of one’s genetic material and the “way of life” taken to be integral to that flourishing (what Levinas, linking Spinoza with neo-Darwinism, calls *conatus*, the endeavor to preserve oneself and one’s kind), underlies the imperative to “save” Chad by returning him to Woollett and its eugenically straightforward moral and intellectual culture. Within the context of an ethic in which the good is dissociable from in-group self-interest, the ideological threat Madame de Vionnet represents is a material evil.

In seeking to modify the self-protective moralism of Woollett with an aesthetic ethics that begins with re-defining self-interest as involving an inner enrichment predicated upon the embrace of difference and ambiguity as conducive to both a sense of wonder and an enlarged ethical sensibility, Strether magnificently fails to grasp either the source or the depth of the hatred he confronts, but he also fails to grasp that Madame de Vionnet, Chad, and their Parisian friends really *are* different from himself. In highlighting how Strether’s aesthetically-mediated empathy is inseparable from a mystified self-love, a romance of self that, in quite strict parallel with Levinasian analysis, integrates the other into one’s own worldview in ways that efface the otherness of the Other by “grasping” her or him, in Levinas’s terms, within “an economy of the Same,” James underscores, as does Levinas, the disjunction between aestheticizing perceptions that compose the world into “pictures” and ethical encounters that traumatize us not just by tearing asunder such pictures but by bringing home to us how much they are effects of our own “allergy” to the other.

What Strether confronts in the famous boating scene is not simply that Chad’s and Madame de Vionnet’s sexuality exceeds the frame he has constructed for them, but that sexuality denotes an alterity and an egoism internal to others that renders them both Other and, in Strether’s terms, “not good.” Aestheticizing ethics and moralistic-materialistic ethics share an association of the good with enrichment, expansion, consolidation of the self and its enlightened interests (which makes explicable why Strether and Mrs. Newsome would have had sufficient sympathy with one another to become engaged). James’ own aesthetics, however, exposes aestheticizing perception to rest on a less blunt but no less real hatred. Whether Strether transcends or succumbs to his hatred is something the novel’s notoriously vexing conclusion perhaps refuses to resolve.