

‘Wondering and Dawdling and Gaping’ in New York City (1843–1855)

On the fine late-summer afternoon of 1904 when the ocean liner *Kaiser Wilhelm II* arrived from Southampton and docked at Hoboken, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from New York City, the passengers who gathered to disembark included the distinguished and highly respected novelist, Henry James. Now tending to corpulence, he was 61 years old, representing himself archly to his readers as a ‘mere ancient contemplative person curious of character’ (AS, p. 19). Though born in America, he had lived in England for most of his adult life. As for his personal circumstances: he was a celibate bachelor in indifferent health, enjoying a variety of close friendships with both men and women, though his passions were engaged by younger men; his closest family was that of his brother William James, America’s foremost philosopher and professor of Psychology at Harvard University.

Henry, too, was a public figure, and this visit to his homeland which would last almost a year, partly answering a personal need, had a public dimension; his progress was reported regularly by newspapers across the country. He planned a book that would record his impressions, to be published in 1907 as *The American Scene*, and he went on to deliver two lectures at numerous venues. He was a name and a celebrity, though comparatively few had read his fiction which, short on action, returned most characteristically to the theme of innocence and its loss, dramatized within intricate relationships in settings both American and European. He had last visited America in 1883 and now he was particularly shocked at the transformation of New York; the once prominent spire of Trinity Church in Manhattan’s Financial District, had been dwarfed by skyscrapers – some reaching as high as 21 stories. The city’s population

had tripled and it had become a centre of commerce and industry. When walking its streets, James was shocked both by the place and its occupants.

The place in which James had spent many of his boyhood years was mid-nineteenth-century New York: he was born on 15 April 1843, at 21 Washington Place, into a family which belonged to the privileged classes. The city had recently become America’s largest conurbation, boasting fresh running water for its inhabitants from the Murray Hill Reservoir, and offering cultural diversion with the founding of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. James’s twentieth-century return acted powerfully, it seems, to draw him back to his memories of that earlier time, a retreat later made more pressing by the death of William in 1910 and a planned edition of his brother’s letters. As a consequence, James embarked in his last few remaining years on a major autobiographical project. In *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) and *The Middle Years* (1917), he found a new voice and evolved a new medium of autobiographical expression. As he explained to his nephew, Harry, ‘It must be an absolutely original, personal, unprecedented thing’.¹

The first two-thirds of *A Small Boy and Others* has New York for its setting, and this city of the 1840s and fifties provides a rich and complex setting for his tender, sometimes self-effacing account of his early life. A short story of 1884, ‘Georgina’s Reasons’, refers to this ‘primitive epoch’ with pointed nostalgia, and it clearly has a kind of Arcadian status for the narrator as he recalls a time when ‘the battered rotunda of Castle Garden echoed with expensive vocal music’, and ‘Hoboken, of a summer afternoon, was a genteel resort’ (*CT* 6: 17). In James’s late memoir, its houses, streets, parks, entertainments, shops, transport, are itemized in detail and in their different seasons – in summer time, for instance, the dusty smell of the city, down in ‘the rank and rubbishy waterside quarters’, and the bushels of peaches transported from Middlesex County, New Jersey (*SBO*, p. 60). Even the playbill advertisements on Fifth Avenue were read and pondered with serious concentration. It is an idealized version of the past, as he readily admits, of locations viewed ‘in a dusty golden light that special memories of small misery scarce in the least bedim’ (p. 161). It was a place of such innocence – his own, at least – that, as he wandered alone, Broadway itself ‘must have been then as one of the alleys of Eden’ (p. 164). It is a place which no longer exists, as ephemeral as his own childhood, a form of personal construction. Everything, it seems, was noticed, nothing wasted, such, as he confesses, was ‘the measure of my small adhesiveness’ (p. 82).

The James Family

James’s paternal ancestry was predominantly Irish; the grandparents of his grandmother, Catharine Barber, had emigrated in the previous century, while his grandfather, William James, had travelled to New York from County Cavan more

recently in 1789. James believed that his grandmother represented ‘the only English blood’ in the family (*SBO*, p. 8), though this has been questioned or modified by later commentators.² Her family had been Scottish Presbyterians, a form of dissent shared by William, and they had emigrated from Ireland. When the two married in Albany, New York, in 1803, Catharine became William’s third wife, both of her predecessors having died young; this partnership in which eight children survived to adulthood could not have been especially happy – Alfred Habegger regards her as ‘simultaneously disregarded and depended on’³ – but it lasted almost thirty years until William’s death in 1832. Their substantial house in Albany, with Catharine at its centre, became a home for her children and grandchildren within an extended family whose members seem to have been especially prone to illness and early death. Aside from her own children (the last born when she was forty-six), there were three from her husband’s earlier marriages; Catharine’s younger sister had also died, leaving eight children. James, in his memoir, remembers this home as ‘a nurseried and playroomed orphanage’ and it is clear that his grandmother, daughter of a former Minuteman, gentleman farmer and judge, had become the kindly but exhausted centre of the large family establishment at 43 North Pearl Street.

Money was not a problem, for William James was a shrewd businessman whose fortune was originally built on trading and importing goods. He had later purchased land in the distant Midwest, in Syracuse, New York, and also Manhattan, and had invested widely and successfully. He had been an early proponent of the construction scheme which linked Lake Erie with the Hudson River; the building of the Erie Canal linked the Great Lakes, and thus the Midwest, with the Atlantic Ocean, an ambitious and highly lucrative venture. The chief speaker at the ceremony celebrating the completion of this historic project on 2 November 1825 at the Albany Capitol was William James. Forceful, irascible, he had become rich, leaving an estate on his death of over a million dollars (some say \$3 million) – a fortune which allowed the next generation (including Henry Sr, the novelist’s father) the luxury of never having to seek employment. His will proved contentious, however: he bequeathed just \$3,000 per year in her lifetime to his wife, and seriously reduced amounts to two of his sons, one of them Henry Sr, with whom there had been a falling-out; he received a mere \$1,250 per year, much less than what most of his more compliant siblings received. But the will was successfully contested and the estate more equitably divided; Henry Sr’s inheritance worked out at \$10,000 per year.

There had been conflict within the family and Henry Sr, whatever his father’s high-handedness, had also been a source of disappointment. The crucial point in his young life had been the major accident he suffered as a boy of thirteen; in a school game (or possibly experiment) illustrating how hot air rises which involved flying balloons with a burning rope attached to them, a hayloft had been set ablaze; he had

tried to douse the fire but his trousers, soaked in turpentine, ignited. One of his legs was so badly burnt that he spent two years in bed and underwent two amputations, the last removing the leg from above the knee. He would later use a cork prosthetic limb, though his capacity to walk would always be compromised. Henry Sr’s tutor, the brilliant Joseph Henry, went on to become a professor at the Smithsonian Institution, a connection ‘of grateful pupil with benignant tutor’ which Henry Jr is keen to mark in his biography of William Wetmore Story, the artist commissioned to execute a bronze sculpture of the eminent scientist (*WWS* 2: 269).

In 1828, Henry Sr, a bright boy of seventeen, enrolled at Union College, Schenectady, an institution not far from Albany to which his father, a trustee, had been a generous donor. He followed a classical curriculum including Latin, Greek and rhetoric, and was popular with fellow students and members of staff. Student life there, was, however, too strict for Henry. Drinking excessively, he quickly ran into debt and eventually dropped out. Having returned, he graduated in 1830, though his academic record remained mediocre. Eventually he gave up alcohol, but his dependency had blighted much of his early manhood.

Having taken up gambling, he followed an uncertain path in the years following. He also became, however, religiously enthusiastic, enrolling in 1835 on a course at Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey, well known for its strong Calvinistic tendencies. He intended to prepare for the ministry, but his religious views here became extreme and he was still beset by his addictions; at this time, some years after the death of his father, his inheritance came through, and he realized that he need never work to maintain self or dependents; after almost two years he left the college and set off on the long journey to England and Ireland, much of his visit spent quietly in London. He returned once more to Princeton, but by now vocally hostile to established religion, he soon dropped out. His later writings, original and sometimes controversial, chart James Sr’s earnest, lifelong spiritual questing and social engagement, though, as F.O. Matthiessen points out, he was ‘always talking about potentiality rather than actuality’.⁴ Two and a half chapters of his autobiography survive, attributed, as his son William observes, to ‘an entirely fictitious personage’. *Immortal Life: illustrated in a brief Autobiographic Sketch of the late Stephen Dewhurst. Edited with an Introduction by Henry James*, reflects his spiritual and emotional commitment, often in highly dramatic detail.

This fragment is included in *The Literary Remains of Henry James*, a collection selected by William James, who attempts to synthesize the essentials of Henry Sr’s philosophical belief: ‘[i]n the first place, he felt that the individual man, as such, is nothing, but owes all he is and has to the race nature he inherits, and to the society into which he is born. And, secondly, he scorned to admit, even as a possibility, that the great and loving Creator, who has all the being and the power, and has brought us as far as *this*, should not bring us *through*, and *out*, into the most triumphant harmony’. William includes, however, a warning for his readers: ‘[d]o not *squeeze* the

terms or the logic too hard!', for 'he despised every formulation he made as soon as it was uttered'.⁵

A fellow student and room-mate of Henry Sr at Princeton, Hugh Walsh, introduced him to his sister in New York City, Mary Robertson Walsh, who (after he had made another trip to Europe) became his wife in 1840. The civil ceremony took place at Mary's home in Washington Square, accommodating Henry Sr's distaste for formalized religion; the bride wore 'India muslin and a wondrous gold headband' (*SBO*, pp. 184–185). A year older than her husband, she came from a wealthy New York family; her father had died long ago in 1820, and her sister Catharine (who also found Henry Sr's original thinking attractive), would, as 'Aunt Kate' become a semi-permanent member of what became the James household. Mary clearly offered her husband a reassuring stability, and her son Henry (despite portraying some grotesque family dynamics in his fiction) invariably speaks of her with warmth. The couple would have five children, and the marriage seems to have been happy, though from the beginning when Mary had renounced her 'rigidly devout' faith,⁶ it was largely she who deferred to her husband's often idiosyncratic needs.

Children quickly arrived: William in 1842, Henry in 1843, Garth Wilkinson (Wilky) in 1844, Robertson (Bob) in 1846, and Alice in 1848. Theirs was a peripatetic childhood owing to Henry Sr's restlessness. When Henry Jr was just six months old the family travelled to England and also visited France before returning to New York a year later, in autumn 1844. The following year they were living at 50 North Pearl Street, in what is now downtown Albany, close to grandmother James, where they remained until early 1846. Albany, high up on the Hudson River, some 150 miles north of Manhattan, was at this time considered to be on the edge of frontier territory, a thriving river port, and one of the country's biggest cities, though Henry recalls it as bathed in a golden light redolent of a painting of a Dutch street scene, his grandmother's house (demolished in 1860) with its 'yellow archaic gable-end', a memory of 'brick baked in the land of dykes', and cobbled streets (*SBO*, p. 13). The family then returned to New York, travelling between the two cities until 1848, when they moved into a newly built house bought by Henry Sr at 58 West Fourteenth Street. Here they stayed until 1855 when once again the entire family crossed the Atlantic; they remained in Europe for almost three years, living in Switzerland, France and England. They returned, not to New York, but to Newport, Rhode Island, when, having stayed for a year, they left once more for Switzerland in 1859. By October 1860 they were back again in Newport, and here they stayed until 1864. The next move was to Boston, Massachusetts, and, in 1866 they crossed the Charles River to Cambridge. Their house at 20 Quincy Street would become the family home until Mary's death in 1882.

European travel was the norm for comparably wealthy, privileged American families in these 'classic years of the great Americano-European legend' (*LC* 2: 1167), but such relentless movement and long-distance travel are exceptional.

Doubtless, however servanted and supported, the weight of organizing travel arrangements for small children and for creating some form of domestic order fell upon Mary James's shoulders. The intellectual excitement, meantime, was for her husband; in London in the winter of 1843, carrying a letter of introduction from Ralph Waldo Emerson, he met Thomas Carlyle as well as a range of other British luminaries, including John Stuart Mill, Alfred Tennyson (not yet a Lord) and George Henry Lewes. The following year while staying near Windsor he suffered what he described as a 'vastation'. The term applies primarily to the idea of laying waste, as in war, but by the middle of the nineteenth century (OED quotes Emerson's 'Swedenborg; or, the Mystic' (1847) as an example) the term had come to mean 'the action of purifying by the destruction of evil qualities or elements'. James Sr's account indeed dramatically describes 'some damndè shape squatting invisible to me ... raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life',⁷ as if some demon within, perhaps expressing the kind of inherited guilt derived from formative religious teaching, needed to be exorcized. He attributed his long and difficult recovery from this crisis to the writings of Swedish philosopher and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, whose ideas he would study for the rest of his life. William James suggests that 'his philosophy indeed is but the statement of his cure'.⁸ Henry Sr had been drawn to Swedenborg by the anonymous articles of the British doctor, James John Garth Wilkinson, who would become a close friend, and for whom his third son would be named. Emerson, too, published an important essay on Swedenborg, examining the relations between mysticism and scientific reasoning.

The effect of the Jameses' migratory life on the children was enduring: apart from the six years they spent in New York, every home and any local friendship would have seemed temporary; education was similarly piecemeal, provided through a range of establishments or private tutors. On the other hand, they lived in a stimulating, unconventional and loving environment, and were exposed to an extraordinary range of experiences as they moved between two continents and appreciated at first hand the riches of European culture. In later years William James, commenting on his younger brother Henry and his long residence in England, offered a more general insight applicable to the dynamics of their family and the rich interdependencies it engendered: '[h]e's really ... a native of the James family, and has no other country'.⁹

The 'Dispensaries of Learning'

Henry Jr's education, as he recalls it, was curiously haphazard, allowing him little opportunity to distinguish himself. School didn't begin well: brother William had preceded him to the Dutch House in Albany and 'was already seated at his task'; Henry, by contrast, was dragged there, 'crying and kicking', quickly retreated and

refused to return (*SBO*, p. 12). The two brothers, we are told (possibly with some exaggeration) were never again in the same schoolroom together. Always ‘round the corner and out of sight’, William would never be caught up with, and Henry projects his own role as secondary and subservient. His schooldays in New York City emerge as generally uninspiring and uncertain, both stressful and dull, peopled by Dickensian grotesques among the adults and unleavened by peer friendships. He began in Dames’ schools, feeling some ‘humiliation’ at being taught by genteel women who ‘handled us literally with gloves’ (p. 17): their names survive – Mrs Daly, Miss Rogers, Miss Sedgwick, Mrs Wright (Lavinia D.). He was tutored at home in French, by ‘small brown snappy Mademoiselle Delavigne’, and ‘a large Russian lady’, with ‘Merovingian sidebraids’ who had arrived, it seems, ‘straight from Siberia’ (pp. 19, 21). He takes pleasure in summoning up ‘certain faint echoes, wavering images’ of other teachers now consigned to anonymity, ‘ladies and gentlemen, dimly foreign, mere broken syllables of whose names come back to me’ (p. 160), though the name of the formidable Count Adam Gurowski, a Polish émigré, fluent in French, German and Russian, survives, however brief his tenure.

Later Henry was enrolled at the Institution Vergnès, probably on 166 East 10th Street (though he says Broadway, *SBO*, p. 160) which offered a wide variety of modern languages (such schools were fashionable at the time) as well as commercial arithmetic and higher mathematics. There he witnessed, sitting alongside ‘[l]ittle Cubans and Mexicans’ much ‘whacking’; among ‘infuriated ushers, of foreign speech and flushed complexion’, Henry sat ‘unscathed and unterrified’, protected simply by his own insignificance (p. 163). In 1853–1854 he attended with William the school of Richard Puling Jenks at 689 Broadway,¹⁰ ‘a small but sincere academy’ whose drawing- and writing-masters, Mr Coe and Mr Dolmidge, are recalled with affection (p. 170). Benjamin H. Coe looked like the formidable war veteran General Winfield Scott, but produced small, treasured ‘drawing cards’ for his pupils. Handwriting and calligraphy were important elements in the curriculum of the time, and Mr Dolmidge becomes an emblem of his discipline, ‘a pure pen-holder of a man’ and likened to a Phiz or Cruikshank illustration for Dickens’s fiction (p. 165). After a year the boys were withdrawn, ostensibly because Mr Jenks moved premises, and in 1854–1855 Henry came under the tutelage of Messrs Forrest and Quackenbos in a shop-like if fashionable establishment at 71 West Fourteenth Street, where, once again, he languished. Having failed to succeed at Latin in Mr Jenks’s school, Henry was compelled to study ‘the theory and practice of book-keeping’, while William was promoted to the first floor ‘classical’ department. Here at least, with Mr Forrest, ‘awful and arid’, school became reassuringly predictable: ‘we didn’t, under his sway, go in terror, only went exceedingly in want’ (pp. 170, 172).

Henry attended some dozen schools and experienced a range of curricula, but remained passive and unengaged, preoccupied ‘with almost anything but the fact of

learning’ and receiving no ‘throb of assurance or success’ (pp. 169, 158). Though we are reliant here on the elaborate medium of the writer’s recollections, a few points emerge: the large number of establishments attended, enough to ‘excite’ the author’s ‘wonder’ (p. 17), his seeming imperviousness to most of what was offered, and his confessed insignificance. No blame is attached to the parents who were paying these school fees, and for whom the idea of continuity seems to have been absent. It was not unusual for boys at this time to attend a number of schools (as occurred with some of the James cousins) though even in subsequent years in Switzerland, James Sr’s choice of schools was, at best, eccentric. Henry’s vocabulary as he recalls his relationship to his education as ‘inapt’ and of his having shown ‘inaptitude’ – terms much less common than ‘inept’ and ‘ineptitude’ – may signify some unease, a sense of opportunity lost.

Aside from the Dickensian references which represent Henry’s young self as a kind of innocent, haplessly abandoned to the world, James invokes in these pages of recollection another work of fiction, Alphonse Daudet’s *Jack* (1876). The young hero of the title attends the Gymnase Moronval, described in consistently colonialist language as a ‘multi-coloured school’, located in ‘one of the finest quarters of Paris’,¹¹ having been deposited there by his self-indulgent mother. James sees his own schooldays as presaging this work, a fictionalized account of ‘contemporary customs’, as if he had already lived certain of the experiences it narrates and can vouch for their authenticity. He sees himself in the moment, so absolute and unavoidable as such childhood moments are, when Jack looks around and believes he, a native of the place, is as bereft as those of his contemporaries who have come from the distant tropics, the ‘pays chauds’: ‘It seemed to him that his life was now to be thrown amongst orphans, forsaken children, himself as forsaken as though he also had come from Timbuctoo or Tahiti’ (*Jack*, p. 51). Such sensations of isolation, institutional carelessness, parental negligence, enacted in privileged conditions, are powerfully – forensically – recorded, though the pain and irritation have become tempered in the elaborate nuances and allusive gestures of late-Jamesian prose.

Adopting a more direct, assertive voice, James himself offers a strange (if touching) justification of his parents’ approach to education – namely, an encouragement of their children to ‘Convert, convert, convert!’ all experience, even ‘things vain and unintended’, for their best moral development (*SBO*, pp. 173–174): not to pursue the vain idea of ‘success’ but to aspire to ‘spiritual decency’ – as if life itself didn’t already offer enough opportunities for boredom or disappointment. In the public arena of his writings Henry Sr affirmed portentously that he wished any child of his to become ‘an upright man’, by ‘instructing his understanding by moral truths, and investing him with a certain responsibility over his own conduct’.¹² By contrast, his son’s most unguarded, and significantly retrospective comment on his education is direct and untypically bitter; it appeared not in print but in a letter of 8 November

1906 to his niece, Peggy James (William's daughter), with reference to himself as that distant 'small boy': he looks tenderly at his past self, as if he were a neglected Dickensian child: 'No one took any interest whatever in *his* development, except to neglect or stunt it where it might have helped – and any that he was ever to have he picked up wholly by himself'. The conclusion is corroborated independently by the youngest of the James children, Alice, when she advised William on his children's education: 'What enrichment of mind and memory can children have without continuity and if they are torn up by the roots every little while as we were! Of all things don't make the mistake wh. brought about our rootless and accidental childhood'.¹³

Young Henry's early education may have failed him, though he was to find less formal means of apprehending the world. For instance, the British illustrated weekly magazine *Punch*, with its humorous satirical commentary on current figures and institutions, which he describes, with a nod to Matthew Arnold, as its "'criticism of life" ... gentle and forbearing',¹⁴ with contributions from William Makepeace Thackeray (a favourite author) and illustrations by John Leech, provided insights into alternative social and political systems in the most entertaining way for this 'silent devotee'. It must have helped form part of that soon-to-be-fulfilled dream of Europe; indeed, he recalls how, for him, '*Punch* was England: *Punch* was London; and England and London were at that time words of multifarious suggestion to this small American child' (*CWHJA*, pp. 358, 359).

For the time, though, New York itself could offer him a richly diverse, potentially dangerous, set of experiences. The most important opportunity was to be found in the operation of the city itself and his parents' apparent willingness to let him wander its 'beguiling' streets alone, 'master of my short steps', like some child in a Perrault fairy tale, though he, at least, remained a 'safely-prowling infant' (*SBO*, pp. 24, 85). He sees himself once more as the small boy, smelling 'the cold dusty paint and iron as the rails of the Eighteenth Street corner rub his contemplative nose' (p. 25), yet such a natural habit of observation also anticipates a future adult calling to be played out on the streets of Europe's great cities. It is an activity which he self-deprecatingly calls 'dawdling and gaping', a pursuit ostensibly unambitious and inactive, but which denotes a sensitivity, a capacity to receive an impression, to feel a relation or 'vibration' which is the distinguishing mark of the creative artist.

Mid-nineteenth-century New York City retained a semi-rural or -agricultural character, with poplars, pigs and poultry in evidence near Henry's Fourteenth Street home. Soldiers still rehearsed their parades in Washington Square seven blocks from home. But even now the city's infrastructure was changing: as Henry and William walked back from school along Fourth Avenue, they witnessed with excitement 'a riot of explosion and a great shouting and waving of red flags' as work began on the Hudson River Railroad which would link Manhattan with Albany

(p. 23). For the James family it meant that the twelve-hour overnight voyage up the Hudson by steamboat would be replaced by a shorter rail journey along its banks, and the consequent loss for young Henry of that ‘peculiar note of romance’ (*AS*, p. 164) as the boat docked ‘in dim early dawns’ (p. 146).

New York City: Art and Theatre

The young Henry was also taken to art galleries by his parents, having an especially vivid memory of a painting which would achieve an almost mythological status as a patriotic emblem of the heroic in American history. Emanuel Leutz’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), now exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shows the revolutionary commander highlighted against a line of boats crowded with men and horses battling through the winter ice-floes as they prepare for victory. When it was exhibited in New York at the Stuyvesant Institute the James family went to view it after dinner one winter evening; the eight-year-old Henry was especially thrilled at the lateness of the hour and the ‘wondrous flare of projected gaslight’ which illuminated the work. The romance of the experience did not deter him from eventually questioning this initial enthusiasm; his critical scruples were engaged and he later judged it ‘lividly dead’. At home, the emphasis, in decorative terms at least, was on Europe, with front and rear sitting rooms displaying ‘a great abundance of Italy’ (*SBO*, pp. 207–208, 210); a sculpture of a Bacchante made in some Roman studio by an American artist graced the back parlour.

In the other room was hung a large painting of great significance: Thomas Cole’s *View of Florence from San Miniato*, completed just a few years before Henry’s birth (1837). In a sense, it reflects some of the values and aspirations of the James family itself. Cole is habitually called ‘the American Turner’, as James mentions, and his work certainly inspired the generation of painters belonging to the Hudson River school who created atmospheric, often sublime landscapes, typically depicting the grandeur of the country’s rivers and mountains. In fact, Cole was a British painter who responded to the scale and magnificence of the New World to which he had emigrated, and his training was essentially European. The choice of subject, too, is European, a product of the artist’s first stay in Italy (1831–1832). None of the James family had, as yet, visited Italy, though James Sr had crossed the Atlantic several times.

As we shall see, Europe was a seductive and troubling presence in young Henry’s early years, but a place as yet to be dreamt of and wondered at. The picture meanwhile allowed him to lose himself ‘as soon as look’, and a small monk seated in the foreground became ‘a constant friend of my childhood’ (*SBO*, p. 210). When he

finally arrived in Europe the continent's meaning became manifest to him as a pictorial insight, a glimpse altogether less serene and composed than the Cole *veduta*. He had looked out from a travelling carriage on a scene both humble and romantic, which seemed somehow timeless. A ruined castle formed the backdrop for a single figure, 'a woman in a black bodice, a white shirt and a red petticoat, engaged in some sort of field labour': 'I knew her for a peasant in sabots'. He had never before seen a peasant and the scene with its quite complex sociological and historical message served as an emblem of Europe, a 'sublime synthesis, expressed and guaranteed to me' (SBO, pp. 220, 221).

The theatrical entertainments available in mid-century Manhattan constituted the other facet of Henry's unofficial education which would play out significantly in his mature life. The idea of the dramatic 'scene' (such as that in a play) would come to occupy a central role in the construction of his fiction, but, more directly, his aspirations to succeed in the theatre were long-lasting. To write for the stage was, he noted in 1881, 'the most cherished of all my projects.... None has given me brighter hopes – none has given me sweeter emotions' (CN, p. 226). His early memories conjure up in lovingly colourful detail the theatrical productions, vaudevilles, circus spectacles and pantomimes, along with their participants, which formed the entertainment of 'our old original New York'.¹⁵ Along with the performers the names of the venues – Burton's Theatre, the 'Lyceums' of Wallack and Brougham, Old Broadway Theatre, Park Theatre, Niblo's Garden, Castle Theatre, Tripler Hall, Barnum's, National Theatre – are all affectionately listed. Early in life he enjoyed watching such plays as Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado about Nothing*. He could have been as young as seven when he saw the first of these at Niblo's Garden, the magnificent, recently rebuilt theatre on Broadway, and Harriet Holman, playing the role of Luciana, came out dressed in white satin, 'quite irrelevantly' to sing to the audience between the acts, much in the manner of popular vaudeville. The waiting for the curtain to rise was an anguish hardly to be borne: 'One's eyes bored into it in vain, and yet one knew it *would* rise at the named hour, the only question being if one could exist till then' (SBO, p. 88).

Although alive to the romance of the theatre and to its staged illusions, this sharp-eyed child didn't fail to notice the mechanics by which such effects could be achieved. He enjoyed an old favourite of the time, W.T. Moncrieff's *Cataract of the Ganges*, billed temptingly as 'an equestrian melodrama', and recalled as 'a tragedy of temples and idols and wicked rajahs and real water'. He watched with excitement the heroine, 'preferring death to dishonour', dashing up 'the more or less perpendicular waterfall on a fiery black steed and with an effect only a little blighted by the chance flutter of a drapery out of which peeps the leg of a trouser and a big male foot' (SBO, pp. 93, 92).

The world of theatre seems, from the beginning, to have existed for him as a fascinating mix of the glamorous and the mundane. He looks back, in older age, to the unnervingly corporate ‘face’ of the actor and the dismaying gap between its ‘histrionic’, stage presence and, ‘with the artificial lights turned off – the fatigued and disconnected face reduced to its mere self’ (p. 86). He had admired the ‘tragic actress’, Miss Emily Mestayer, who had appeared in James Sheridan Knowles’s *Love*, performed at the Old Broadway Theatre in the 1850s, yet when he had glimpsed her, years later, in a Boston street, she appeared as ‘the very image of mere sore histrionic habit and use, a worn and weary, a battered ... *thing* of the theatre, very much as an old infinitely-handled and greasy violoncello of the orchestra might have been’ (p. 129). The unsparing observation marks the disappointment of finding that the fostered illusions of the past cannot be sustained. The adult James would always be drawn to the idea of performance, the mystery of dramatic illusion, and the contrasting reality of everyday circumstance.

Though Shakespeare was fairly consistently in production in New York, the plays of Sheridan were also popular, as well as those more modern works by actor-manager Dion Boucicault. Such Dickens novels as *Dombey and Son*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* were frequently plundered for their high drama, ready sentiment and comic eccentricities, and reduced to knockabout stage adaptations – ‘the roughest theatrical tinkers’ work’. Similarly crude versions of French plays, notably those of Alfred de Musset, were frequently performed: ‘what was then not of French origin?’ James wonders (*SBO*, pp. 97, 94). Some six decades later he could recall (mostly with great accuracy) the names of the actors and their costumes, the stage effects – the wrecking of a steamboat, for instance, the live horses onstage, the sheer spectacle ingeniously achieved. Meantime, the names of these places of entertainment, ‘Lyceums and Museums and Lecture Rooms and Academies of Music’ (p. 89), promoted an idea of high seriousness which belied their commercial priorities. Henry enjoyed performances by Italian singers and conjurors, by the Ravel family, acrobats, dancers and pantomimists, in this ‘pre-trapèze age’, as well as admiring the grace of Signor Leon Javelli, the celebrated rope-dancer now remembered for having crossed the Niagara Falls on a tightrope (pp. 136, 137). And on certain Saturdays Henry would travel down Broadway to the Great American Museum of Phineas T. Barnum to pass along ‘the dusty halls of humbug, amid bottled mermaids, “bearded ladies” and chill dioramas’ (p. 127).

New York theatre of the mid-century mixed high art with the sensational and spectacular, and its plays and players were primarily of European origin. But a literary event of 1852 highlighted a specifically New World condition of historic significance. Within months of its serial appearance in an abolitionist magazine, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been adapted for the stage and it would continue to be successfully performed in numerous different versions into

the twentieth century. Probably more people saw it onstage than read it as a novel, and its themes and characters became part of the national identity and its language. With its vivid evocation of the conditions of the enslaved people of the South, the work made such a social and political impact that it influenced events leading to the Civil War of 1861–1865. On a more personal level, Henry saw so many different performances of the play in the company of his brother William that he attributes to it his faculty of ‘conscious criticism’, a means of comparing and assessing which would eventually, as he says, throw him ‘into the critical arms of Matthew Arnold’. Despite registering some detectably crude moments, Henry’s impression was of ‘a story rich and harmonious’ (SBO, pp. 133, 134).

The subtitle of Stowe’s work is ‘Life among the Lowly’ and there was a point in these years when James’s experience touched briefly on such lives. A neighbouring family, the Norcoms, recently arrived from Kentucky, had ‘two pieces of precious property’ in their household: Aunt Sylvia (pronounced ‘An’silvy’) and her son Davy were enslaved servants. James wonders if they had ever read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The ‘light-brown lad’ (his father presumably a white Master) and his mother with her ‘vivid turban’, were ‘a joy’ to get to know, Davy adding ‘a pictorial lustre that none of us could emulate’. The owning of slaves in New York City was not that unusual at this time, but mother and son did not stay long: belying young Henry’s innocent impression of happiness, the two, taking advantage of this northern stay, fled suddenly into the night, to become part of that dangerous fugitive movement by which the enslaved sought liberty. ‘I don’t remember their going, nor any pangs of parting; I remember only knowing with wonderment that they had gone, that obscurity had somehow engulfed them’ (SBO, p. 198).

This was a brief, scarcely understood encounter for James with the ‘peculiar institution’ that would divide the nation. It occurred a good decade before the outbreak of Civil War and the catastrophic, internecine conflict between North and South, but the Norcom family itself was notable for its different southern ways and lavish hospitality: ‘the sausage-mill kept turning and the molasses flowing for all who came’ (p. 195). Henry has only to look at the scar on his hand to recall one of their sons, Reggie, who accidentally crushed his fingers in the hinge of a closing door. There was another boy, too, a few years older than Henry, and so not available as a friend, to whom he had been drawn, ‘the slim, the sallow, the straight-haired and dark-eyed Eugene’, on whose fate he speculates. Was he a victim of that war? James is haunted by ‘some dark but pitying vision’ which sees him ‘stretched stark after a battle’ (p. 198). James never learnt what happened to Eugene, but one source states that he had died in 1864 at the age of 27, a victim not of war but of consumption and that the family came not from Kentucky, as James has it, but North Carolina. Eugene was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, or New York City in 1837 (information varies), and became a bookkeeper.¹⁶

Henry James’s earliest surviving letter (written before summer 1855) charmingly indicates that his theatrical interests were met to some degree within his close domestic circle. It was sent from Paris to a boyhood friend and neighbour in New York, Edgar Van Winkle: ‘Dear Eddy / As I heard you were going to try to turn the club into a Theatre. And as I was asked w’ether I wanted to belong here is my answer. I would like very much to belong / Yours Truly / H James’. Though Henry’s younger siblings are hardly mentioned in *A Small Boy* (it was doubtless too shaming to play with younger children), brother William plays an important, even dominant part, always one step ahead and gone before his younger brother could catch him up. They played with neighbouring boys of the street (many with the surnames of the city’s wealthiest families) and staged their own shows, dramas for which it seems Henry provided the text on folded sheets of stationer’s ruled paper specially purchased on Sixth Avenue, the final quarter sheet left blank for an illustration of the scene; he relished the paraphernalia and conventions of the drama, the entrances, exits and indication of ‘business’ to be enacted. As for performance (which took place in one of their attics), he habitually remained in the wings, short of an improvised costume to wear, while William, ‘in fantastic garb’, fronted the public as the ‘constant comic star’ (*SBO*, pp. 203, 199). At such times Henry seems passive, an observer rather than protagonist, and the content of these dramas is neither disclosed nor even perhaps remembered. It is the situation, the excitement, which matter. He would go on experimenting with the drama in his adult life until compelled to admit defeat in a traumatic and public experience in a professional London theatre. There is a similarly compelling gap in his account of preparing ‘a romance’, with school-friend Louis De Coppet who, by his name, accent and culture represented the allure of France and, indeed, embodied Europe (his family was a combination of Swiss-French and American): his was ‘the toy hammer that drove in the very point of the golden nail’ (p. 32). Once again, the pleasure derived from peripheral matters – the ‘business’ of planning how to publish their work – leaves no time for anything to be created.

William is shown occupying centre-stage in these theatrical ventures and, indeed, he was the most influential figure in his brother’s early life: clever and entertaining, and showing great talent, he is considered superior in every way, confirmed by his superior place at school. At home, Henry is his quiet and loving observer, as William ‘sits drawing and drawing, always drawing, especially under the lamplight of the Fourteenth Street back parlour ... always at the stage of finishing off, his head dropped from side to side and his tongue rubbing his lower lip’. So much of this volume is about observing, gaining impressions, ‘gaping’, so clearly an apprenticeship for novel-writing. Henry casts himself humbly and consistently as ‘the imitative, the emulative’: William ‘drew because he could, while I did so in the main only because he did’ (*SBO*, pp. 167, 205).

Early Life and Experiences

If the provision of Henry James's formal education seems woefully careless and inadequate, family circumstances allowed for other opportunities which enabled the children to meet some of the most influential thinkers and writers of the time. In November 1852 William Makepeace Thackeray began a lucrative American tour in which he delivered his series of lectures on 'English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century'. He opened in Boston, travelling as far south as Savannah, Georgia, but he spent considerable time in New York, where he was entertained by the James family. Young Henry was horrified (though Thackeray was fond of children) to find himself summoned by the celebrity visitor with the words 'Come here, little boy, and show me your extraordinary jacket' (p. 74). He was drawn into the library where the British guest appeared 'enormously big' (indeed, six feet three inches) and 'the hand of benevolence' was laid on his shoulder. The nine-year-old was wearing the jacket which appears in the Mathew Brady daguerreotype with its nine visible buttons, and so Thackeray named him 'Buttons', which probably meant little to Henry but which, in England, signified the uniformed pageboy or servant in a hotel. The memory stayed with him, and so did the jacket. It was still in James's possession when he came to dictate his memoirs five decades later and he rushed off to find it to show to his temporary typist, Miss Lois Barker.¹⁷

In these years the works on philosophical and theological topics published by Henry James Sr included *Moralism and Christianity; or Man's Experience and Destiny* (1850), *Lectures and Miscellanies* (1852), *The Church of Christ Not an Ecclesiasticism* (1854) and *The Nature of Evil, Considered in a Letter to the Rev. Edward Beecher, D.D.* (1855). He also began giving public lectures at such venues as the Stuyvesant Institute, the meeting place, too, for the Swedenborgian Society in New York. In March 1842 Henry Sr had heard Ralph Waldo Emerson lecture and was immediately enthused, indeed infatuated, by his person and ideas, describing him as 'a soul full of doors and windows, a well-ventilated soul, open to every breeze that blows, and without any dark closets receptive of ancestral political and ecclesiastical trumpery';¹⁸ he rapidly introduced himself to this Transcendentalist who urged men and women to find 'an original relation to the universe'.¹⁹ An intense, at times troubled relationship between the two men developed, and Emerson became a frequent guest in the James household, one of the bedrooms being designated 'Mr. Emerson's'.

Horace Greeley, editor of the increasingly influential *New-York Tribune* ('a new morning Journal of Politics, Literature, and General Intelligence') and a supporter of Emerson, shared similar interests, providing space over a number of years for Henry Sr's sometimes contentious letters and articles on such subjects as, for instance, 'free love'. A little younger, the abolitionist journalist Charles Anderson Dana, a contributor to the Transcendentalist *Harbinger* magazine, had joined the staff of the *Tribune*, and shared Henry Sr's sympathies with the Fourierist movement,

a group advocating idealistic social experimentation and female equality. George Ripley who, like Emerson, had resigned his church ministry, had been instrumental in the founding of the Transcendental community at Brook Farm in Massachusetts, and Bronson Alcott who had established another short-lived community also belonged to this circle which gathered around Emerson. Henry Sr’s relations with all of them would have difficult moments, principally because of his strongly expressed and often-changing views; his temperament seems reflected in his writing style – brilliant, unpredictable, and often large-spirited.

When Henry was taken by his father to the offices of the *New-York Tribune* on Nassau Street in Lower Manhattan he found it ‘a wonderful world indeed, with strange steepnesses and machineries and noises and hurrying bare-armed, bright-eyed men, and amid the agitation clever, easy, kindly, jocular, partly undressed gentlemen (it was always July or August) some of whom I knew at home’ (SBO, p. 63). His later journalistic experience would leave him forever disillusioned with the newspaper world, partly because of its perceived shallowness and sensationalism, but also because it was a profession for which he had himself shown little aptitude.

It was during this visit that his father was handed a new work written by one of the *Tribune*’s reporters, Solon Robinson. *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* was published in 1854 and is dedicated to Horace Greeley ‘and his co-laborers’. A collection of vignettes which first appeared in the *Tribune* depicting the poverty, dangers and deprivation experienced by children living in the notorious Five Points district of Lower Manhattan, it tells the stories of such girls as ‘Little Katy’, ‘Madalina’, ‘The Ragpicker’s Daughter’ and ‘Wild Maggie’. Little Katy sells hot corn on the Manhattan streets, singing, ‘Hot corn! Hot corn! / Here’s your lily-white corn. / All you that’s got money / Poor me that’s got none – / Buy my lily-white corn / And let me go home’. Its publishers claimed to offer ‘works intended to promote temperance and virtue, to lift up the lowly, to expose to open day the hidden effects produced by Rum, to give narratives of misery suffered by the poor in this city’.²⁰ Young Henry was immediately interested, only to be informed that this was no work for ‘an innocent child’: its pages remained closed to him. In fact, he was just a year or two younger than his fictional counterparts, but the moment serves as an emblem of social division and the disparities between privilege and poverty. *Hot Corn*, sensational and sentimental in the style of popular journalism of the time, presents that other dark and squalid world which has no place in *A Small Boy and Others*. As he records, he was fobbed off with another work which quickly became a best-seller, a ‘romance ... on every one’s lips’ (SBO, p. 66), Maria Susanna Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854). This improving fiction in which virtue is rewarded as an orphan girl from Boston’s streets finds happiness through her own enduring goodness and love offered a sanitized version of urban reality less troubling, less shocking, than the sensationalism of *Hot Corn*.

Henry Sr was undoubtedly a loving if unpredictable father and even in his son's kindly and carefully phrased account he emerges as irrevocably impractical, even irresponsible, having 'a wonderful way of being essentially right without being practically or, as it were, vulgarly, determinant.... It was in no world of close application that our wondrous parent moved' (*NSB*, pp. 41–42). His troubled past was never referred to, but it is clear that the lives of many of the other men (predominantly men, it seems) within the extended James family were permanently blighted. The wealth acquired from a driven, ambitious young immigrant such as William (William of Albany, as he has become known) who had emerged as an authoritarian father allowed his offspring the freedom, whatever safeguards he tried to impose, to become jobless, feckless, and heavy drinkers, summed up as those 'incoherent Albany uncles' (*SBO*, p. 147).

Henry Sr's half-brother Robert predeceased his father, dying aged 28; John Barber, 'the brightest of the Albany uncles' (*NSB*, p. 37), became a gambler, philanthropist and heavy drinker, dying on 22 May 1856 in a Chicago hotel room aged 40. Uncle Edward led a similarly troubled, alcohol-dependent life, and was dead at 38. Howard James at 59, had had no career, and had been treated for alcoholism in a number of asylums. Henry's mother, Mary James, reported on 8 August 1869 that he appeared in Albany 'far from sober' and 'and about to go into the Binghamton Asylum'.²¹ The novelist privately thought him 'very good-looking' but 'of an almost *épouvantable* [appalling] badness', 'most loved, most beautiful, most sacrificed of the Albany uncles'; his son, Johnny, 'a tormenting hoverer and vanisher,' just as 'luckless', died, probably suicidally, aged 23 (*SBO*, pp. 154, 157). Both Edward and Howard, with their hats worn 'slightly toward the nose', are treated kindly and discreetly: they were 'not less than strikingly genial, but with vaguenesses, lapses, eclipses' (p. 148). Later, another of young Henry's cousins, Bob Temple, son of Henry Sr's favourite sister Catharine, makes sporadic appearances in the family's life, getting by as a conman and forger, and begging from his rich relations. Though in later years he was spurned by brother William, the more emollient Henry sometimes helped him out with money.

Henry's uncles are mentioned in an episode described as full of 'mystification' in his early life when he is taken to the Manhattan establishment of Mrs Cannon by his father. It was a summer's day when the two travelled back from Staten Island where the family were holidaying – the occasion, it seems, when the famous daguerreotype was made of father and son in the studio of Mathew Brady. Mrs Cannon, however, 'lurked near Fourth Street ... "back of" Broadway', and her establishment with 'independent side access' was both 'a parlour and a shop'. It is genteel and decorous, with Mrs Cannon getting on with her sewing – 'a shop in particular for the relief of gentlemen in want of pocket-handkerchiefs, neckties, collars, umbrellas and straw-covered bottles of the essence known in old New York as "Cullone"' (*SBO*, pp. 78–79). The term 'particular', in French *particulier*, signifies



Figure 1 Henry James with his father, Henry James Sr (c. 1854, daguerreotype by Mathew Brady)

privacy. Talk with Mrs Cannon and the staff, which included Miss Maggie and Miss Susie, would often turn to inquiries about Mr John, Mr Edward and Mr Howard: ‘their consumption of neckties and Eau de Cologne was somehow inordinate’, though the puzzled Henry cannot help feeling that such purchases are not ‘their only *consommation*’ – another French term, carrying for Anglo-Saxon readers, a sense of sexual relief. So discreetly appointed, the place offered ‘an intimacy of comfort that the New York Hotel couldn’t yield’. The term ‘dissimulation’ recurs ominously. The situation was understood by all, including Mrs Cannon, Miss Maggie and Miss Susie: ‘It was only I who didn’t understand,’ the reminiscing James emphasizes, as if it were a scene from that sustained exploration of childhood innocence and its cynical, adult exploitation, *What Maisie Knew*.

In a 1913 letter to his friend Howard Sturgis apropos the recently published *Small Boy and Others*, James confided, ‘Uncle Edward never married – he was *most*

particularly of Mrs Cannon's', while Uncle Gus, another uncle, 'wasn't of the "Mrs. Cannon" company. He was the eldest of all and more detached and maritally, etc. established'. The location is important, however; the area just a block west of Broadway, Mercer Street, had become at this time well known for its brothels,²² and James's language consistently skirts the reality. The services of prostitutes were commonly available to wealthy New Yorkers at this time, so the behaviour of this generation of James brothers was not untypical. In his public writings Henry James Sr had pronounced on the matter of sexual relations, controversially advocating free love, and, in these years, he regarded monogamy as a form of slavery.²³ Aside from this revelation of his private pursuits – and more disturbing – is that he would take his ten- or eleven-year-old son with him, incorporating this call into a day out which was primarily intended to have that portrait taken – an intended gift, it seems, for Mother who stayed at home. In fact, this was not a one-off: there were visits 'delightfully repeated'. If young Henry had originally been at a loss to understand, he seems now to call his father to account, implicating him through the veiled nuances and masterful indirection of his powerful late style. Such autobiographical revelations transcend the scope of the standard memoir of the time.

Such uncles and cousins were, he says, the object of 'sad vague headshakes' as they sank into anonymous obscurity. Their deaths seem to have become familiar and predictable events for the growing Henry: '[a]ll the uncles, of whichever kindred, were to come to seem sooner or later to be dying, more or less before our eyes, of melancholy matters' (*SBO*, pp. 154, 111). Cousin 'J.J.' (John Vanderburgh) who had shown musical talent, left behind ghostly 'aesthetic manifestations' figured poignantly as 'the thinnest conceivable chip of stray marble, the faintest far-off twang of old chords' (p. 154). The settings in which these self-destructive lives were enacted were often, nevertheless, elegant and urbane. With his family James visited, for instance, his uncle Gus (the oldest of the uncles) and aunt Elizabeth at Linwood, a magnificent estate at Rhinebeck situated on a bluff on the banks of the Hudson River. Henry was especially impressed by the 'gardens and graperies and black ponies, to say nothing of gardeners and grooms who were notoriously and quotedly drole' (*SBO*, p. 149). In fact, part of the place had been owned by another uncle, John Barber James,²⁴ who had incurred debts from gambling and so probably had to give up Linwood. Gus's tenure was fairly brief: by 1865 the estate had been sold once more, he had lost much of his money in speculation and would die in a pitiful state in 1866. Despite its grandeur and hospitality, there was an underlying insecurity and impermanence in this home.

For Henry the occasion held other significance, too. One of his young cousins, Marie Bay James, played up when told that it was bedtime; her mother insisted on her 'not making a scene' and the phrase, a moment of 'witchcraft' for the observing boy, proves, in his re-telling, to be transformative. He had not apparently witnessed such defiance before (Marie was generally acknowledged as 'spoilt'), and he has the

realization that we have choices and some autonomy in the matter of ‘scenes’: ‘we could make them or not as we chose’. A ‘rich accession of possibilities’ attaches to this incident, reaching as far, perhaps, in another form of ‘witchcraft’, as his own ‘scenic’ method which would characterize his fiction, allowing the dramatic *scène à faire* to convey its own message freed from obvious authorial intrusion. The occasion carried a further, more tragic significance. Henry Sr had been summoned to speak to his sister Catharine whose husband, Robert Emmet Temple, lay dying in Albany in the late stages of tuberculosis; she had been unwillingly removed to Linwood to preserve her life, though she, too, was suffering from the disease. In fact, both died in 1854, leaving nine children, the youngest no more than a year old. Henry is the unwilling witness of the offstage scene between brother and sister: ‘Vivid to me still, as floating across verandahs into the hot afternoon stillness, is the wail of her protest and grief; I remember being scared and hushed by it and stealing away beyond its reach’ (SBO, pp. 151–152). It was a sudden brush with impending mortality, a premature collision between childhood and a complicated adult tragedy.

Children lacking parents (one or both) were familiar within the extended James family, to the extent that naïve young Henry envied such ‘blest orphans’, attributing to ‘orphans *as* orphans a circumstantial charm, a setting necessarily more delightful than our father’d and mother’d one’. Many of the characters, scenes and situations recounted in his memoirs take on some of the features of Dickens’s fiction with its range of parentless children. James saw his own recollecting as a formalizing, composing medium, his imagination ‘making a scene’ of events which occurred decades ago: ‘I see the actors move again through the high, rather bedimmed rooms – it is always a matter of winter twilight, firelight, lamplight; each one appointed to his or her part and perfect for the picture, which gave a sense of fulness without ever being crowded’ (SBO, pp. 103, 107). Memory has acted to resolve life’s disorder into some more formal composition, each actor integrated into the scene. On one occasion it is the young orphan Albert, son of Mrs James’s cousin, Alexander Robertson Wyckoff. A little older than his James cousins, and inheritor of distant land in the Beaverkill district of the Catskill mountains (about 80 miles from Manhattan), he is considered more knowing; his future will lie, not, it seems, in Europe, but the American West.

William and Henry were invited to take a trip with Albert, but parental permission was refused: ‘the place was in the wilderness ... reached by a whole day’s rough drive from the railroad’ and offering the ‘possibility of prowling bears’. The household at nearby 72 West Fourteenth Street which had taken Albert in is governed by ‘Great-aunt Wyckoff’, ‘an image of living antiquity’, who ‘signified her wants as divinities do’ and was never heard to speak (pp. 105–107). She is cared for by her daughter, Helen, who has also taken charge – indeed control – of Henry, her younger brother, who is mentally impaired. The relationship is partly fictionalized by James as sister and brother are translated into Miss Betsey Trotwood and Mr

Dick in Dickens's *David Copperfield*. It is a novel young Henry had heard read aloud in the evenings; hoping to hear more of it, and thus avoiding bed, he had secreted himself under a table, to be discovered only when he burst into tears of sympathy during the pages describing the cruel Murdstones.

Mr Dick is thwarted in writing his own history because King Charles I keeps trying to find his way into the volume; the impediment for cousin Henry, as rich as he is simple and seemingly harmless, is that he is accounted untrustworthy and therefore allowed just ten cents per day for any extraneous living costs. His sister Helen rules the household and James notes with some pleasure how, after her death, Henry has three years of innocent freedom, his life blooming 'like a garden freshly watered'. A more sinister perspective, derived not from Dickens but from Aeschylus, arises when James recalls his cousin Albert as 'a small New York Orestes ridden by Furies' (*SBO*, pp. 125, 113), thus associating cousin Helen not with the murderous wife and mother, Clytemnestra, but with Electra, Orestes' decisive sister who saves him from death. He uses the same classical allusion when describing a dominant female figure in another part of the family, and it is clear that many of its men, impoverished, diminished or incapable, had surrendered themselves to female dominance. If such women are savours, the men are in many respects victims, not least in their relinquishing of power in the domestic setting. The classical comparison forms part of a retrospective assessment, of course, but it also hints at a degree of sexual antipathy toward such women and a corresponding affection for the men, however weak or stoical.

One further episode from Henry's young life further illustrates (as he represents it) some ambiguity about gender and its representation. A part of his education had taken place in 'the halls of Ferrero', the elegant dancing establishment run by Edward Ferrero, 'in the prime of life, good-looking, romantic and moustachio'd', where the boy attended classes. Ferrero was much admired by the accompanying mothers at the evening entertainments and, living up to his heroic appearance, he would go on to raise a New York military regiment in the Civil War. Fiddlers provided the music for dancing and Ferrero was supported by his sister Madame Dubreuil and her husband, a baritone from the opera, 'flushed, full-chested and tawnily short-bearded'. The scene with its decorous, slightly flirtatious undertones might have come from a Thackeray novel. For the school's celebrated fancy-dress ball Henry donned a costume curiously at odds with such embodiments of conventional Victorian masculinity. He appeared in the garb of a *débardeur*, previously worn by his cousin Johnny at 'some Parisian revel', its 'puckered folds of dark green relieved with scarlet and silver' giving out 'an exotic fragrance' (*SBO*, pp. 187–191). There was some mystery within the James family as to what a *débardeur* was, 'and I am not sure indeed that I know to this day', he adds – a disingenuous comment, given his knowledge of French culture and language.

A *débardeur* was a stevedore or unloader of goods and a version of his clothing became popular in the Parisian masquerades of the mid-century. Thus its origins

signified male manual labour, but, in a transformation, it became popular with women who, in thus cross-dressing, combined ‘working-class roughness with female sexuality’. The outfit, ‘with its open shirt, wide cummerbund, and baggy pants, the uniform of porters in the wine markets ... licensed insolent behaviour, an imitation of the stevedore’s Herculean and cheeky independence’.²⁵ For André Gide in *L’Immoraliste* (1902), the *débardeur* is classed with the tramps and sailors, ‘the lowest dregs of humanity’, who haunt the muddy alleys and stinking booths of Syracuse, and so the type becomes charged with erotic possibility and danger.²⁶ In this item of fancy-dress and its history of male sweat, transformed and sanitized into a fashion style adopted by women, the small boy, Henry, emerges as a confused innocent. And James allows the confusion to remain, hinting at his own feminized self in a social setting which seems to have had no words for such a possibility.

The James family’s departure from New York on 27 June 1855, Liverpool-bound aboard the luxuriously appointed steamship *Atlantic*, was inevitable. The prospect of an extended stay in Europe had often been mooted by Henry Sr, already familiar with that trans-Atlantic journey. In fact, he had escorted his young family (when Henry was just six months old) to Europe in autumn 1843 and they had stayed for a year, principally in England. The novelist claimed, later, ‘in the second year of my life’ to remember, in Paris, being ‘[c]onveyed along the Rue St-Honoré while I waggled my small feet’ and having admired the Colonne Vendôme in the square of that name (*SBO*, p. 46). The column commemorates Napoleon Bonaparte’s campaigns of 1805–1807 and the observation seems prescient since the novelist would go on to have a lifelong fascination with the French Emperor. On their return, his parents had talked fondly of London, Green Park and Piccadilly, and he recalls burying his nose in new books, often printed and published in Britain, to savour ‘the English smell’. He was soon infected and ‘prematurely poisoned’ by the idea of Europe (pp. 69, 70). When he was taken to the New York Crystal Palace (‘second of its name’) which had opened on 14 July 1853, the first world’s fair held in America, his bleak mood was immediately lifted. The place was ‘vast and various and dense’, the sculptures marvellous: ‘[i]f this was Europe then Europe was beautiful indeed, and we rose to it on the wings of wonder’. Indeed, the entire family, we are told, kept breaking out ‘in choral wails’ at the allure of the Old World (pp. 139, 118).

This family preoccupation with Europe seems to have set in as early as 1849, as can be seen from the list of books borrowed by Henry Sr from the New York Society Library on Broadway which included *English Civilization*, Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, John Sanderson’s *The American in Paris*, Gray’s *Rome*, Husted’s *Italy*, Tappan’s *A Step from the New World*.²⁷ For many families in the James circle an extended European stay was a matter of course, but when the time finally arrived, the reason for going was ostensibly educational. It was judged that the boys, following the ways of their New York peers, were becoming loud and badly behaved. Their father refers to his ‘four stout boys’ importing ‘shocking bad manners from

the street' (*NSB*, p. 156), and William once rejected his brother's request to play by boasting, 'I play with boys who curse and swear' (*SBO*, p. 202).

European schools were also considered superior to what was available in New York – though Henry Sr's choices there were certainly flawed. His brother John Barber had taken his son Johnny (John Vanderburgh) to Switzerland, to a school in Vevey, and Henry had earlier consulted his friend Edmund Tweedy on possible places in Geneva. He was seeking for his children a 'sensuous education' and the opportunity to 'absorb French and German' (*NSB*, p. 156). Tutors had already provided some language tuition and young Henry had had a brief visit to an establishment where a cousin was enrolled, Madame Reichard's finishing school for young ladies on Fifth Avenue, in which French only was spoken. Henry's senses were already alerted: 'I sniffed it up aromatically, the superior language ... it took the form of some strong savoury soup' (*SBO* pp. 153–154). The put-upon heroine of one of James's short stories of 1877, 'Four Meetings', is observed during her Atlantic crossing: after years dreaming of Europe she sits, 'at the side of the vessel with her hands crossed ... looking at the eastward horizon' (*CT* 4: 94), the goal of her direction of travel, exemplifying a form of devotion and a poignant sense of destiny that would have been readily recognized by the James family. Henry, too, was excited by the prospect of change, though he was unaware (as probably his father was, too) that the family would never again make their home in New York.