

## **The Tacit Other. Identity and Otherness in two Texts by Henry James**

### **Abstract:**

This paper was given at the 2nd International Congress of the Greek Association of General and Comparative Literature, Athens, November 8-11 1998, with the general topic: "Identity and Otherness in Literatures, 18th-20th Centuries". In Henry James this topic is approached again and again as the 'International Theme': The American going to Europe and experiencing the clash between the American identity and the European origin, the American materialism and the European culturalism, the American vulgarity and the European sophistication and, also, the American dynamics and the European petrification - such dichotomic intricacies are exposed on an existential and cultural level in the confrontation with the cultural Otherness. Here, this theme is analyzed in its artistic and discursive complexity on the basis of James' travelogue *The American Scene* (1907) and the early novel *Washington Square* (1881).

Dette foredrag blev holdt ved 2nd International Congress of the Greek Association of General and Comparative Literature, Athen, 8. -11. november 1998, med temaet "Identity and Otherness in Literatures, 18th-20th Centuries". I Henry James' værker bliver dette tema behandlet igen og igen som det 'internationale tema': Amerikaneren der rejser til Europa og oplever sammenstødet mellem amerikansk identitet og europæisk oprindelse, amerikansk materialisme and europæisk kultur, amerikansk vulgaritet og europæisk sofistisering og også amerikansk dynamik og europæisk forstening - sådanne spegede dobbeltheder fremstilles på et eksistentielt og kulturelt plan i mødet med den kulturelle Andethed. Dette tema analyseres her i dets kunstneriske og diskursive kompleksitet på basis af James' rejseberetning *The American Scene* (1907) og den tidlige roman *Washington Square* (1881).

## **The Tacit Other. Identity and Otherness in two Texts by Henry James**

### **The International Theme**

The so-called international theme is a major theme in Henry James' work - in his fiction and non-fiction, in his novels and stories, and in his more, as well as less, accomplished texts: the American who is longing for Europe, or just to get away from America, and who walks museum galleries of the major cultural capitals of Europe, only to find out that to be rooted in European culture requires more than just looking; but to turn around, forget about the European experience, and return to America as if nothing had happened, is to no avail.

Once the American gets the taste for Europe, the relationship between an Euro-American identity and its otherness is displayed or staged whether the American is at home or in the old world, but it is never lived through to a solution. A mild resignation with an ethical flavour makes us balance between the conflicting poles which, to a certain extent ñfor us too, here and now ñ have defined the tension between identity and otherness in many industrialised countries for quite some time, right into the era of present day globalisation, now inspiring us, now haunting us: a localised tension between continents transgressing localisation.

The main point is, that once had, experiences cannot be cancelled. What carries identity, and what represents otherness in the encounter between Europe and America - Europe or America or both? - is an open question in James' universe, a hidden and insoluble contradiction beneath the perfect surface of his texts, more of a troublesome condition for identity than its opposite. But it is also, and maybe for that same reason, an aesthetically productive contradiction, as I shall show in two contrasting texts: the travelogue *The American Scene* (1907) and the novel *Washington Square* (1881) with the main focus on the latter.

In *The American Scene* James gives an almost desperately bitter account of his first return from Europe to the USA in 20 years, in 1904-05 (even so, the New York edition of his works is decided on that same occasion.) One can almost open the book at random and find remarks such as: "These things [of real refinement like the New York City Hall] are the salt that saves, and it is enough to say for their delicacy that they are the direct counterpart of those other dreadful presences, looming around them, which embody the imagination of new kinds and new clustered, emphasized quantities of vulgarity" (James 1993: 450). James is a displaced person in a place which itself is hardly a proper place any longer. But exactly this fact triggers his imaginative and aesthetic power, transcending the alienating details he is constantly relating to the reader. This realism of the genuine observation is what Adorno once, with reference to Balzac, called "Realismus aus Realitätsverlust" (Adorno 1973: 30).

*Washington Square* (1881), the early novel by James, not found worthy of being included in the New York edition, is written before the international theme in his mature work was well established. Here, the main character, the young Catherine Sloper, shows us some variants of the theme that may give a richer picture of it, but maybe less subtle, than in that of the later James. What we see is a Jamesian aesthetics in the making on the same ground as in *The American Scene*: a loss of the sense of belonging turned into aesthetic strategy.

### **Identity and Otherness in *The American Scene***

Although the travelogue is a stylistically more refined and sophisticated work by a writer who has matured since the more uneven novel *Washington Square*, it is, nevertheless, in terms of its entire structure and its positioning of the writing and perceiving subject, by its very nature as non-fiction, less complicated than the novel which, therefore, will be analysed in more detail. My remarks on *The American Scene*, although written later, may thus be taken only as an overture, in order to highlight the intertwinement of thematic structure and aesthetic strategy when we wish to discuss the relation between identity and otherness.

The word 'scene' in the title warns the reader that he is to observe things belonging to a world of a different ontological order than his own. The preface confirms this idea: the writer is a stranger with a fresh eye, predictably impenetrable to many explanations of the present state of affairs in the USA and therefore essentially forced to take his stand on impressions alone (James 1993: 353). Therefore he is to select impressions on a highly subjective and maybe not always conscious basis. The result is that he will have to rely on his artistic skills and concerns: he has to tell a story, to use his capacity to make literary representations, to focus on the human subject and on the appreciation of life more than on the bare facts themselves. In other words: the foreignness and the multifariousness of the impressions force him to behave like a writer of fiction (ib.: 354). Now, the preface is, of course, written as the last piece of the travelogue, and here James partly discloses the writing as an artistic creation and not as an account of unvarnished facts, partly forecloses it in claiming that "The following pages duly explain themselves, I judge, as to the Author's point of view and his relation to his subject" (ib.: 353). If this were the case, it would certainly be the only text by James to explain itself.

I have always quoted James' contempt for the spectacular vulgarity of American culture, i.e. metropolitan culture, exposing a delight in quantity and money, unambiguous and direct as a packet of cigarettes. The immediate opposite to this dominant experience is that the natural surroundings of the city itself are still there, unchanged but relegated to the background: the sea and its sounds (ib.: 357) or the small houses of "a beautiful quality" on Cape Cod (ib.: 385). Such impressions are not just filled with alternative qualities, but with an "exquisite emptiness" that is an absence of predefined and clear cut meanings, offering an openness to subjective projections and emotions, or, like the rocky parts of New England, filled with "fine undistinguished hills" that cannot be used for anything in particular (ib.: 373). Such impressions, indistinguishable or not, are, however, compared to artistic forms: Italian painted, and paintable, landscapes, Browning's poetry, Japanese silk painting, French impressionism among many other references (ib.: 372, 385, 393).

That leads James to ask for the type of forms that the new American environment creates in the "almost sophisticated dinginess of the present destitution" which, basically, is an "abolition of *forms*" (ib.: 377, 376, cf. 440 ff). Here, we are no longer talking of the forms inherent in things analogous to art and beauty or the sharp edges of the urban fabric. Such forms display the immediately perceivable identity of things, although the latter abolish the former. James' quest for forms opens the more basic question of creating forms out of the cultural decline, even destruction, he is witnessing. Does this process have a form and thereby an identity?

This is the process James is forced to engage himself in when confronted with the American scene: he cannot escape, because also his memories and identity are located here, even if abolished. In writing about it he is, nolens volens, attempting to give it a form. His quest concerns both himself and the things he is confronted with. Hence, he both has to fill the "apparent void" (ib.: 366) behind the new sense of quantity and commonplaceness of peoples and things (ib.: 717) and to address and react to "the queer *other*" (ib.: 368) behind the remnants of the disappearing sense of nature, quality and human specificity. There is a lack of specifiable form behind the simultaneous presence of the two cultural opposites he encounters.

James the observing absentee (ib.: 400) and James the artist or story-teller (ib.: 390) are in a constant dialog where the latter gets the upper hand. James' primary duty is not to report first hand from the USA of 1904, but his obligation is to find, or to shape, the new in a form out of its negativity, to find a form in, more than behind, the impressions and appearances he collects as an uninitiated outsider (ib.: 353).

First, he admits that he has nothing to offer the reader but a permanent questioning, because the form he is looking for is not simply there to be grasped as if in the hills or on the street: "It's a negative garment [just to be asking and not answering], but it must serve you; which it makes shift to do while you keep on asking, from the force of acquired habit, what may be behind, what beneath, what within, what may represent, in such conditions, the appeal of the senses or the tribute to them" (ib.: 393). Second, the outcome of

his asking, seen as a process of artistic creation, is like being forced to swallow things of mixed and predefined tastes even before you know you are hungry or in any want of exactly this mixture of tastes, "and though the consequent taste, as a mixture with other tastes, was of the queerest, no proof of the sovereign power of art could have been, for the moment, sharper" (ib.: 393f).

Third, the very mixture of such incommensurable tastes in one move "made everything else shrivel and fade: it was like a sudden thrill of a nightingale, lord of the hushed evening" (ib.: 394). This sense of triumph, generated by the creation of form out of the 'apparent void' in seeing the 'queer other' in it and not only in the hills, waters and white cottages, produces the surprising effect "that as the "interesting" [the unusual and imposed mixture of tastes] puts in its note but where it can and where it will, so the village street and the lonely farm and the hillside cabin became positively richer objects under the smutch of imputation" (ib.: 395).

What James declares is that to give the new America of mixed tastes its proper form is not to deny its appalling effects on him, but to absorb them in telling about them in relation to all the elements James cherishes, but to which they do not themselves relate. Thereby the negative elements contribute to heighten the quality of the positive elements, and all elements are then, through James' art of story-telling, part of the same contradictory totality. This integrative identity is the triumph. Here the new and the old are each others' Other, so to speak, in a dichotomy mediated by an art that shows the tacit presence of the new in the old, and vice versa, through which both acquire their particular identity. If James stopped denigrating the new, the old would also lose its profile. And if, on the other hand, he withheld his contempt for the new, its role as the 'apparent void' which necessitates his artistic endeavour would be lost. *The American Scene* is not primarily about James' impressions of the new America and nostalgia for the old, but about his *ars triumphans* when born out of the grand international theme and shaping it in the discursive *tour de force* that also engendered James' identity as an artist, and not as American or European or Euro-American.

## ***Washington Square***

The story of young Catherine Sloper, living in ante-bellum New York before the destitution of civilisation James faces in 1904, is also a variation over the international theme, but in an earlier and less reflected stage. Nevertheless, the structuring of how identity and otherness interrelates is more complex, and therefore a precursor to the later, more mature James. Like many James characters, Catherine also travels to Europe, accompanied by her father, Doctor Sloper. He is an upper class New York practitioner, believing only in unambiguous inferences drawn from sensual perceptions, especially visual ones, interpreted as signs of hidden facts. What cannot be grasped in this way is either not yet a clear fact or not a fact at all. A true believer in the semiotics of everyday life. In this way his fatherly gaze - the art of looking is well developed in Doctor Sloper - has pierced right through the young Morris Townsend who is courting Catherine. Hence, he wants to bring her to Europe to change her mind and make her forget about the not quite young Morris' charm. European culture might help, but especially the fact that if she does not follow her father's advice - to force or command is not the strategy of Doctor Sloper who wants people to be able to see and judge for and by themselves -, then she will be left without a penny, a fact that will eventually cool Morris off.

Apart from her stern father, Catherine is surrounded by her widowed aunt, Mrs. Penniman, a naive busybody urging Catherine toward Morris, she herself being taken in by his conventional smiles and slick manners. During the European adventure of father and daughter, Morris moves in with Mrs. Penniman in Sloper's house, taking advantage of the wine cellar and the Doctor's easy chair. She becomes his devoted partner in his marry-Catherine project, inventing various stupid schemes taken right out of the romances of the day.

Catherine herself is a somewhat clumsy person with a somewhat vulgar taste, and also a somewhat slow minded person - in short, she is a somewhat-type of person through most of the novel, although with a stubborn bent quite parallel to that of her father, and with a personality gradually developing into a personal

identity. Doctor Sloper has brought his fanciful sister into his household after his wife has died, amazingly enough in order to make a clever person out of Catherine. She ends, like Eugenie Grandet and many other women in 19th century literature, alone, more frustrated than resigned, more knowledgeable about the facts of life than she cares to be if she wants to live happily, and deprived of the capacity to forget.

Her key one-liner is uttered twice to Mrs. Penniman right after her return to New York from Europe: "Catherine, are you changed?" - "No, I am the same" - "You have not swerved a line?" - "I am exactly the same". What sameness is Catherine talking about here: a sameness of opinion or of character, given the fact that one might remain the same by changing one's mind? - And in relation to what otherness? - Europe evidently did not mean much to her nor to her father (James 1995: 135). They both brought their own context with them, but used it differently when they came back.

### **Identity and Otherness in *Washington Square***

Catherine's declared sameness is defined in relation to four types of otherness. Each of them is of varying importance, but as a whole, they define the whole cultural setting of Catherine's life and the story of it, and are of greater complexity than we have found in *The American Scene*:

- 1) The cultural otherness
- 2) The social otherness
- 3) The gendered otherness
- 4) The discursive otherness

I'll explain these four types briefly and offer you my conclusion in advance: to keep from being absorbed by one or several of these instances of otherness, she attempts to liberate herself entirely from them all and is therefore caught, like the other characters, by a sameness in which she does not recognise any otherness, which basically means loneliness and not sameness. She is, however, the only one to accept this situation without disclosing her recognition of the unalterable facts of her life to anyone else. This gives the narrator his specific role as the tacit other, just as the 'queer other' behind the unspecifiable mixture of tastes in the American



experience turned the writing process into a an aesthetic experiment and not a travel report.

1) The *cultural otherness* comprises everything abroad, here meaning outside New York - be it Europe, the strange destinations of Morris' travels, or just the rural outskirts of the city or the hinterland. The characters react differently to the experience of the cultural other: Doctor Sloper, as a born and sworn rationalist, acts in the same manner wherever he is, and is not impressed by anything new or strange; life is made up of the same stable, simple and perceivable facts all over the world; Morris shapes himself to any place and situation in which he can gain something, and Mrs. Penniman lives in a placeless world of trivial romance and vivid imagination.

But for Catherine the cultural other is what determines her life, even before she realises it herself: she meets Morris at her aunt, Mrs Almond's ball, taking place in the "an embryonic street" uptown Manhattan still with "a rural picturesqueness" (ib.: 17). His approach forces her, for the first time in her life, we are told, not to answer directly but to respond by an indirect evasive utterance when asked by her cousin if she liked Morris (ib.: 21). She is also fascinated by Morris' stories about his travels and international life, but her reaction, in contrast to her father's and aunt's, is a silence very different from the outspoken customs of the Slopers (ib.: 41). Finally, her encounter with Europe, meant to be the turning point, bringing everything out into the open and back to the pre-Morris days of the family, makes, however, the silence continue, until Catherine's already quoted but not very detailed statement: "I am the same".

So, the cultural otherness constitutes a realm outside language and outside the social routines, but marked inside language as silence or evasiveness, and inside the ordinary social routines, not as a break, but as a reconsideration of norms that have hitherto seemed to be stable and infinitely repeatable (cf. ib.: 13), thus internalised as a tacit emotional pressure that is never lived out. Therefore we come to know about the effects of the cultural other mainly through the narrator's textual strategies; and at the end

Catherine goes only to the seaside, one of the sites of the cultural other, in August under protest, according to the narrator (ib.: 170).

2) The *social other* is related to the urban setting around the Sloper residence at Washington Square, where everything begins and ends. The novel takes place in the 1840s, in a period when the city really began to expand northward. Doctor Sloper has moved north in 1835 from the City Hall area to the newly constructed Washington Square to avoid a city beginning to be a roaring place (ib.: 16). But already some years later one had to go further uptown to realise one's quest for a quiet place, like, for instance, Aunt Almond, who lives in "a region where the extension of the city began to assume a theoretic air" (ib.: 17). So, in fact, the house is a stable island on an "isle" - Manhattan - where the "murmur of trade has become a mighty uproar" (ib.: 16).

The inflexibility of the owner has the house as its icon, but is contrasted to the dynamic surroundings to which it is foreign. It is a kind of detached urban place in the city. The conflicting relationship between the house and the city is, on the other hand, expressed in Catherine's life, until the end, where she indirectly identifies herself with the stability of the house: she goes only to the seaside in August under protest, the narrator tells us (ib.: 170). Again, only the narrator allows us to judge the role of the social other.

3) The *gendered other* is the most powerful in the novel, impersonated, as far as Catherine is concerned, in Doctor Sloper and Morris, one of them absolutely inflexible, the other absolutely opportunistic, both of them different from Catherine. She is the property of Doctor Sloper, bound to him as any domestic animal, taken care of, but shaped according to his will and wishes. (Doctor Sloper himself, we may add, has good reason to surround himself with obedient women, his wife and his son have died in spite of, some say because of, his ideas of treatment. The women represent to him, quite traditionally, the irrational other). But the will and wishes of the good Doctor take on two opposite directions: on the one hand, he wants Mrs. Penniman and Catherine to do as he wants them to, but at the same time, as a hard core rationalist, he wants them, contradictorily, to be independent, clever and free individuals - but in his way: the lofty fantasies of his sister are not

the right way, and his daughter's fancy for Morris is equally wrong. He wants, again contradictorily, Catherine both to remain his object and to be a subject. She is caught in a true double bind.

Morris plays with Catherine's affections, impressed by the unmistakable touch of money in her looks and social environment. He takes shape according to what he thinks conforms to her image of what it is to be an independent subject through a man. In the beginning, for example, he is, and is perceived as, "clever" and "natural" (ib.: 20, 22) according to Doctor Sloper's standards for proper behaviour (ib.: 10). So, for Morris the strategy is to separate her from Doctor Sloper (but not from his money, of course). But for Catherine the relationship to him and to her father are but two sides of the same coin: to be object and subject at the same time. So, the contradictory character of her relation to men (which Freud could have analysed at length) makes it necessary not to choose between them, but to break with both or be bound to both.

The turning point in relation to the two men is reached when she is able to shape her own life in her own words. This happens just before and after her return from Europe; she arrives at a meta-discursive level. First, she becomes aware of their interconnectedness. She explicitly states to her father that staying with him and enjoying his protection and care implies that she obeys him; if she does not, she has to leave (ib.: 113). Second, she declares to Morris that she will not forget him, because that would disappoint her father - who respects her stubbornness (ib.: 115).

After having returned, she is able to recognise what separation means. She explains that she feels "separated" (ib.: 132) from her father, because his fatherly behaviour shows his dislike of her, not his love (ib.: 131). She feels rejected. And at the same time Morris, being disappointed in his hopes for marriage and money, speaks of a separation for some time between the two lovers (ib.: 145). Now *she* is the disappointed one, for she had thought of Morris, unknowingly following her father's line of thought, as her "own exclusive property" (ib.: 130) for whom she has "done a great deal" (ib.: 132), and is now rejected by him as well. This double rejection - as object in relation to her father and subject in relation to Morris - throws her into a "void", makes her feel "something dead in her life"

(ib.: 165). This recognition is related to us by the narrator, or in direct speech. She is an "abject" in Julia Kristeva's words, again placed on the border of language and social life.

After this last outburst of passion in her life (ib.: 148) she remains silent, staying in her father's house. The "secret story" of her life (ib.: 165) is not just the love story, telling about her sameness as regards her feelings and faithfulness toward Morris or her affection toward her father. Her sameness consists primarily in a repetition of her father's habit of turning the other into an object, making her just as lonesome as Dr. Sloper after his wife died. Her father has "broken her spring" as the narrator tells us (ib.: 165).

4) The *discursive other* is the narrator. This narrator is not only the narrator of Catherine's life, but of the life of all the characters. But the narrator is not a neutral and transparent voice, as we know from James' musings on narrative strategy, where he defends the quasi-dramatic positions of observing on the part of the reader and showing on the part of the narrator; whereas the attempt to 'go behind' like an authoritative narrator is avoided (cf. James 1962: 111). Neither is the narrator a definite transpersonal character, as it were, remaining the same all the way through, as the characters, like Catherine, claim they do. The narrator is a textual instance whose strategy is determined by the way the cultural, the political and the gendered other change throughout the novel. The narrator takes on the role of the other when the three other instances of otherness vanish. The narrator is the permanent substitute for the other.

The construction of the narrator's position thus reveals a double narrative strategy: First, the construction of a partial identity between the narrator and Mrs. Penniman, Doctor Sloper and Morris. Second, a clearly marked independence of the narrator vis-à-vis the characters. This distance is expressed by the occasional use of the first person pronoun (I or we) in direct addresses to the reader (e.g. "Our story...", "We know....", James 1995: 161), and by auctorial insertions containing flashbacks or explications about what the narrator finds or does not find it necessary to relate to the reader (e.g. concerning the trip to Europe, ib.: 117). And of course *oratio tecta* flourishes, mixed with reports of the characters'

thoughts (it must be said that James is not always successful in constructing the narrator). The narrator has the capacity to see and say everything as he chooses. But he does not.

Let me briefly exemplify the partial identity with the main characters. Mrs. Penniman has a certain "indirectness and obliqueness of character" (ib.: 11), and the narrator reveals the same characteristics: "[Catherine] was not ugly; she had simply a plain, dull, gentle countenance. The most that had ever been said for her was that she had a nice face; and though she was an heiress, no one had ever thought of regarding her as a belle" (ib.: 11). The narrator also doubles Morris, who says something meaning something else; pleases people to please himself. He seems: and the narrator also displays things that seem: "He found a good place - a charming place, a little sofa that seemed meant only for two persons", "And yet Mr Townsend was not like an actor; he seemed so sincere, so natural" (James, 20, 21). Finally, as for Doctor Sloper, who is incapable of not expressing exactly what he means in a direct way, now and then with a sarcastic twist to it. All the narrator's terse reports of facts contain the Doctor's appeal to inferential strategies: "If it were true that she was in love, she was certainly very quiet about it", "If he had been watching him just then, he would have seen a gleam of fine impatience" (ib.: 41, 39).

The more the novel progresses, the more the narrator takes on the Doctor Sloper-style of discourse, the more a certain matter-of-factness enters the discourse: we see, we reflect, we understand. The presence of Doctor Sloper as the most important other is felt both in the social universe and the discursive universe giving voice to Catherine's growing self-awareness: tacit in relation to her father and aunt, but nevertheless moulded in the image of her father in the narrator's discourse. The narrator's frequent use of litotes transforms the Doctor's inference from what he sees to the discursive inference from what we read: we have to infer ourselves from the litotic expressions, as for example: "For a man whose trade was to keep people alive he had *done poorly* in his own family", "At the age of eighteen Mrs Penniman has *not* made a clever woman of her", "But if she expressed herself in her clothes, it

is certain that people were *not* to blame for *not* thinking her a witty person" (ib.: 11, 12, 14, ital. mine).

In the end the characters' direct speech contains plenty of litotic expressions: they are, on the whole, very explicit about what they do not feel, mean or think (e.g., ib.: 179). Thus, the discursive appeal to infer from the said to the unsaid permeates the whole narrative, just as the permanent appeal to the eye, on the level of the social universe, is a permanent invitation to infer from the visible to the invisible. The characters may be alone, but never isolated from the other that gives them their identity and forces them to place themselves in relation to the other in inferring about the nature of the other and themselves at the same time. Catherine can make herself insensible to otherness in the fictitious universe in relation to her father and to Morris, but the narrator, manifesting the otherness on the discursive level, forces us, as readers, to relate to the story as a complex instance of otherness. This strategy of discursive shifts generated by the encounter with an otherness only accessible through inferences about oneself in relation to the other, is, I think, what lies behind James' experiences with the international theme and the narrator, whether we find it in the novels' strategy of 'showing' or the non-fictional strategy of a stylistically fine tuned mixture of irony vis-à-vis experience and self-confidence in aesthetic practice. Thus, *Washington Square* and *The American Scene*, although placed on the margins of James' work, show how identity and otherness interrelate in James.

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