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Henry James's New Approach to the Autobiographical Genre:

The Growing Consciousness of A Small Boy

María Antonia Alvarez

Autobiography is essential to American literature, since it is not only a genre with the most significant origins and famous classics, but also "a necessity in order to say who we are and where we have been." It is both a part of "our daily vernacular and our earliest heritage," which can be traced back to the Puritan diaries and the travel narratives popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Sayre 147). An authentic autobiography must be "a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout interrelated experience." It may have such varied functions as "self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation, self-justification." All these functions "interpenetrate easily, but all are centered upon an aware self, aware of its relation to its experiences" (Weintraub 842). This is the case of Henry James's *Autobiography*, since in the form of a dramatic, distended monologue, he draws the evolution of his conscience in a timeless, spaceless world, as the best example of his stream of consciousness technique. Written in the most refined style of his latest novels, it can be considered a literary experiment in the genre by a writer consistently devoted to change. This article argues that without reading James's memoirs, we cannot understand the rest of his work.

In the three autobiographical volumes, James completes all his previous developments during his fifty-year career as a writer, and also the recapitulation he began in *The American Scene* (1907)—his most elaborate essay on American culture—continued in the Prefaces written for the New York Edition of his tales and novels. His autobiography is the critical justification of his career as a novelist, the revelation of the man inside the writer, his "*final preface*" about the value of art and imaginative life, as he calls it in a letter to Henry Adams:

> I would some day like to furnish my just completed Prefaces to the *New York Edition* of my works with a *final Preface*, as representing over a considerable course the continuity of an artist's endeavor, the growth of his whole operative consciousness. (Letters 361)

A Life of the Imagination

James's approach to the autobiographical genre is quite unusual. By the end of the nineteenth century, the writing of autobiography had become "sufficiently widespread to generate the kind, if not the degree, of popular, critical, and scholarly interest that we take for granted today" (Spengemann 177). But Henry James delineates mental states rather than external facts, applying his *center of consciousness technique* to the author himself, considering that a life of the imagination is as adventurous as a life of action:

> The first began long ago, far off, and yet glimmers at me there as out of a thin golden haze, with all the charm, for imagination and memory ... of the wonder of consciousness in everything. (*Autobiography* 4)

In some strange way, his writing of his late novels was also "a reliving of his earlier life; as if in middle age he had to re-examine, to try again, old artistic experiences, and test them in his maturity" (Edel 28).

When James wrote his autobiography at the age of seventy, he knew that his own life had been far different from other novelists, and for this reason *A Small Boy and Others* (1912), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1913) and *The Middle Years* (1917) can be read as James's justification for his choice to live his life as observer and artist. This explains why throughout his literary career he presents a series of male characters who alter the traditional equation of masculinity with action on behalf of passive males. The complex style in the latest part of his fiction permitted him to portray a range of masculine behavior against the usual forms of manhood in European and American societies: the lives of Ralph Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Cassamassima* (1886), or Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* (1903), among others, are excluded from patriarchal privileges. This literary form, which permits a more intimate, inaccessible James to emerge, consists essentially of "taste achieved through intelligent discrimination: the end of the process of aestheticising experience" (Cox 7). James's purpose in all his works was to register the slightest motions of consciousness. In the densely textured prose of his *Autobiography*, where he narrates the experiences of his later years, he does this mainly in a new form that can be considered his "fourth phase." In the first volume, he also sets down the experience of his boyhood, not probably as it was, but as it lives in his memory, as it re-emerges when he allows his mind to play upon it and to see it as preliminary to all that followed. James's study in the "perspectives of memory," according to M. H. Abraham, "shares a number of features with creative autobiography—the more-

or-less fictional work of art about the development of the artist himself—that began with Wordsworth in the nineteenth century and includes Proust, Yeats, Joyce and Nabokov among its practitioners in the twentieth century" (80). In fact, to read James's *Autobiography*, "the mediacy of self-consciousness as well as the immediacy of feeling" are required, since we understand James's language to be "a genuine activity of shaping reality" (Getz 207).

A Small Boy ...

Most critics have reacted favorably toward the subjectivity of *A Small Boy and Others*, and this can in part be explained by James's reputation in England during the previous two decades: *The Tragic Muse*(1890) had been received with certain indifference, almost ignored, since James had lost that wide public appeal he had acquired at the height of his "international phase," but during the next decade he began to develop "a passionate following among a young generation of artistic and intellectual elite" (Holly 574). To understand the curve of James's career as a whole we must recognize that when he abandoned the "international theme" in the 1890s, he had already found "the different ways to establish the outsider character of his hero and heroine: the protagonists are doubly strangled—kept from their spiritual inheritance by a social world that limits and defines them, and isolates them within that world by their aspirations and fineness of spirit" (Lyons 65). Also, in the novels that follow this period, *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), *The Awkward Age* (1899), and *The Sacred Fount* (1901), that possibility is ambiguous or even ironically fulfilled, but it is tempting to see James's technical experimentation in these works, mainly in the shift of the point of view and the absence of a direct authorial voice which will be an important element in the late novels. What happens is that James "shifts the drama of consciousness from being merely compensatory to being efficacious, from being an escape from reality to being a means of transforming it—there is an access of power that has enlarged the scope of the imagination's force and task" (Lyons 76).

Pre-Freudian critics approached *A Small Boy and Others* for insight into what the nineteenth century defined as central to the artist's soul, i.e., his creative genius. What they found, however, "was indistinguishable from James's own" (Holly 575).They also observed an absence of historical signposts, which "arouse[d] the sort of impatience that had been directed at James's writings since the late 1890s, because of his complicated and abstract style" (Holly 577). This is not the case with *The American Scene*, where Donald Wolff finds a literary form that he calls "rhetorical historiography," since it "approximates Hegel's *conceptual history*, which focuses not only on the cultural life of a nation but also uses that material to speculate about the future, about the direction of history in general" (Wolff 155)

If there is nothing in James's *Autobiography* for creating a historical background—even though its background is solid and interesting—it is because the story is

intentionally shaped along artistic rather than historical lines. James attempted to "reconstruct the childhood of a boy of genius not only by discovering the critical instants at which new horizons were unveiled to him but also by estimating the value of his impression or vibrations" (Holly 576), by changing the traditional role of *author-agent* into that of an *observer*, placed out of the scene:

> I at any rate watch the small boy dawdle and gape again, I smell the cold dusty paint and iron as the rails of the Eighteenth Street corner rub this contemplative nose, and, feeling his foredoomed, withhold from him no grain of my sympathy. He is a convenient little image on warning of all that was to be for him, and he might well have been even happier than he was. For there was the very pattern and measure of all he was to demand: just to be somewhere—almost anywhere would do—and somehow receive an impression or an accession, feel a relation or a vibration. (*Autobiography* 17)

... and the Others

James sees his childhood as a marvelous experience for the senses, a joyous uproar of the mind, while he wanders through the streets of New York without any fixed direction, feeding himself with impressions, vibrations. Yet, what is more important, he applies to another literary genre, an autobiography, the subtle psychological analysis he had introduced into his novels, and the result is probably the most exquisitely accurate record of the growing consciousness of "a small boy" in all literature, a small boy who notices his otherness, but without realizing what it means:

> In that early time I seem to have been constantly eager to exchange my lot for that of somebody else, on the assumed certainty of gaining by the bargain. (*Autobiography* 101)

This otherness was produced by his family's different values and customs. As Quentin Anderson affirms in *The American Henry James* (352), James becomes the *passionate pilgrim* in his discovery of Europe, but he also becomes the restless research spirit of the American scene and of his social and family environment:

> ... he opened up to us, though perhaps to me in particular, who could absorb all that was given me on those suggestive lines, prospects and possibilities that made the future flush and swarm. (*Autobiography* 287)

The Sense of Europe

James emphasizes his slowly growing passion for the *sense of Europe*, instilled in him during his infancy abroad and enlarged throughout his life:

> ... a castle and a ruin ... a woman in a black bodice ... in that static vision was *Europe* a sublime synthesis, expressed and guaranteed to me—as if a mystic gape, which spread all through the summer air, that I should now, only now, never lose it, hold the whole consistency of it. (*Autobiography* 161)

For James, Europe embodied the most complete concept of Art: “Art, art, art, don’t you see? Learn, little gaping pilgrims, what *that* is!” (*Autobiography* 191). Nevertheless, Europe could offer not only beauty, and art, and supreme design, but also “history and fame and power, the world, in fine, raised to the richest and noblest expression” (*Autobiography* 196). His connection with the past still hung thickly on him: “its majesties and symmetries, comparatively vague and general, were subjects to the happy accident, the charming lapse and the odd extrusion, a bonhomie of chance composition and color now quite purged away” (*Autobiography* 186-187). All these experiences he acquired, through every small detail he observed, fed the small boy and future great writer:

> ... that life and manners were more pointedly and harmoniously expressed, under our noses there, than we had perhaps found them anywhere save in the most salient passages of stories. (*Autobiography* 190)

The Obscure Hurt

In his *Autobiography* James presented his literary vocation as a kind of second birth which required all kinds of sacrifices. And although it sometimes became a success, it was a bitter struggle: “at that age mustn’t I quite have succumbed to the charm of the world seen in a large way? For there, incomparably, was the chance to dawdle and gape” (*Autobiography* 19-20). He places the narrative in his own reminiscing consciousness, permitting his memory to flow in a way that Carol Holly calls “controlled association.” However, trying to approach the autobiographical genre from a different perspective, James avoids an overly dangerous psychological terrain and recollects his “myriad memories from the past” more or less in the order in which they occur to him, reshaping them into “the story of his developing consciousness of the past as it lived in the present,” becoming “both the *subject* and the *medium* of the book” (578). Thus, it offers the clues that can help us to solve most questions about his ambivalent behavior: “Can the peculiar void at the center of Henry James’s personality be explained?” Richard Hall asks, “Can there be some reason for his adoption of the life unlived, the beast forever crouched, as the central metaphor in his work be offered?” (25) Cándido Pérez Gállego also asks himself: “What is Henry James’s purpose with so many unhappy endings in his love stories?” (222). There is a central episode in *A Small Boy and Others* which can help us to understand those questions. It refers vaguely to a *dark hurt* James suffered in his youth:

> ... a passage of personal history the most entirely personal, but between which, as a private catastrophe or difficulty, bristling with embarrassment, and the great public convulsion that announced itself in bigger terms each day, I felt from the very first an association of the closest, yet withal, I fear, almost of the least clearly expressible. (*Autobiography* 414)

This “physical mishap” produced by the fire during the Civil War at that “dark hour”—and whose effects “were to draw themselves out incalculably and

intolerably" (*Autobiography* 414)—seems to be the cause of a depression that tormented him for the rest of his life.

The Dream of the Gallerie d'Apollon

There is also an important event; in fact, this is the climax of *A Small Boy and Others* —which may help to clarify James's behavior: the dream, or nightmare, of the Gallerie d'Apollon, in the Louvre Museum. This episode shows James pushing back suddenly a spectral pursuer who threatens to destroy him:

> ... in a summer dawn many years later, to the fortunate, the instantaneous recovery and capture of the most appalling yet most admirable nightmare of my life ... the sudden pursuit, through an open door, along a huge high saloon, of a just dimly-described figure that retreated in terror before my rush and dash (a glare of inspired reaction from irresistible but shameful dread), put of the room. (*Autobiography* 196)

The experience ends happily. As James says, "he sped for *his* life," but this nightmare seems to reflect the young Henry frightened by his elder brother:

> He was always round the corner and out of sight, coming back into view but at his hours of extremest ease. We were never in the same schoolroom, in the same game, scarce even in step together or in the same phase at the same time; when our phases overlapped, that is, it was only for the moment—he was clean out before I had got well in. How far he had really at any moment dashed forward it is not for me now to attempt to say; what comes to me is that I at least hung inveterately and woefully back, and that this relation alike to our interests and to each other seemed proper and preappointed. (*Autobiography* 8)

James's childhood and adolescent atmosphere was mainly influenced by the sibling rivalry between his elder brother and himself. Leon Edel thinks that the tense relationship between the two brothers changed Henry's purpose, and instead of writing William's biography, he became the main character. This shows the need Henry felt to be placed outstandingly in the family picture—a highly competitive circle:

> I taste again in that pure air no ghost of success—a reward of effort for which I remember to have heard at home no good word ... we were to convert and convert, success—in the sense that was in the general air—or no success; and simply everything that should happen to us, every contact, every impression and every experience we should know, were to form our soluble stuff; with only ourselves to thank should remain unaware, by the time our perceptions were decently developed, of the substance finally projected and most desirable. That substance might be just consummately Virtue, as a social race and value. (*Autobiography* 122-123)

Father's Ideas

The Jameses belonged to an age which can be called “the classic years of the great American-European legend”: they were pioneers in the American rediscovery of Europe, the evaluation of Art, the growing of personality and the spiritualization of the Old Continent’s values. And the ambivalence produced by his “*father’s ideas*”—he wanted all the family to travel from one town to another all over Europe and his children to change schools, while they went to museums, concerts, theatres—modeled him as a cosmopolitan writer:

> It was a luxury, I today see, to have all the benefit of his intellectual and spiritual, his religious, his philosophic and his social passion, without ever feeling the pressure of it to our direct irritation or discomfort ... The entire impulse to this devotion figured for us, comprehensively and familiarly, as *Father’s Ideas*, of the force and truth of which in his own view we were always so respectful. (*Autobiography* 330-331)

His father’s theories about religious and philosophical matters were first influenced by Swedenborg, as James explains in his *Autobiography*:

> ... there brought to his knowledge, by a wondrous chance, the possibility that the great Swedenborg, from whom he had drawn much light, might have something to say to his case. (*Autobiography* 340)

And later on by Fourier, where Henry James Sr. found the scientific explanation for a new life on Earth:

> Our father, like so many free spirits of that time in New York and Boston, had been much interested in the writings of Charles Fourier and in his schemes of the phalanstery as the solution of human troubles. (*Autobiography*205)

These theories undoubtedly made his son sensitive to spiritual life, but without answering the calls of any particular church. For this reason, religious beliefs of any kind are not found in his work, but a moral sense is indeed implicit in it:

> It comes over me as I read them (more than ever before,) how intensely original and personal his whole system was, and how indispensable it is that those who go in for religion should take some heed of it. I can’t enter into it (much) myself—I can’t be so theological nor grant his extraordinary premises, nor throw myself into conceptions of heavens and hells, nor be sure that the keynote of nature is humanity, etc. But I can greatly enjoy the spirit, the feeling, and the manner of the whole. (*Letters* 112-113)

The Vampire Theme

The love Henry James Sr. felt for his wife is also essential for the development of the novelist’s career. Knight Aldrich thinks that “the myth of the mother is a question-key in James’s fiction; this symbolizes*possession* in most cases” (373). An example of it is Mrs Grose in “The Turn of the Screw”: she “may have represented his mother, in reality a destructive woman, but a woman of whom James was so afraid that he had to repress his perception of her evil characteristics and consciously could only see her as good” (373).

Thus, based on James's thought that the husband derived his strength from his wife and, reciprocally, the woman could appropriate the man's life, Edel developed his "vampire" theory, since "the wife helped her husband so much that he could not live by himself." This was what happened to his father, who died some months after his mother, "being even a menace for him, who submitted to a ridiculous dependence" (55). It is the main theme of *The Sacred Fount*, and if Love meant danger and to be taken to the conjugal bed meant death, perhaps for this reason James chose the safest way and remained single, without thinking of getting married for the rest of his life.

The Heroine of the Scene

This lack of feminine contacts has also been related by his critics to a passional frustration in Minny Temple. Nevertheless, James's ambiguous personality could be better understood after the publication of his cousin's letters in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, the second volume of his memories, and the expressions he dedicated to her explain her legendary meaning for the writer:

> ... slim and fair and quick, all straightness and charming tossed head, with long light and yet almost sliding steps and a large light postponing, renouncing laugh, the very muse or amateur priestess of rash speculation. To express her in the mere terms of her restless young mind, one felt truth, under the shadow of female *earnestness*—for which she was much too unliteral and too ironic; so that, superlatively personal and yet as independent, as *off*into higher spaces, at a touch, as all the breadth of her sympathy and her courage could send her, she made it impossible to say whether she was just the most moving of maidens or a disengaged and dancing flame of thought ... the enthusiasm of humanity, but she burned herself out. (*Autobiography* 283-284)

According to Edel, Henry loved Minny in his own way: "as much as he was capable of loving any woman, as much as Winterbourne, uncertain and doubting in his frosty bewilderment, loved Daisy, or the invalid Ralph loved Isabel: a questioning love, unvoiced and unavowed, and not fully fathomed" (326). His cousin was for James a questionable love that could neither be defined nor declared. Minny appeared before Henry

> ... as radiant and rare, extinguished in her first youth, but after having made an impression on many persons, and on ourselves not least, which was to become in the harmonious circle, for all time, matter of sacred legend and reference of associated piety. (*Autobiography* 10)

As Howells had done before, Christof Wegelin calls James "the inventor of the American girl" (56-59). The heroine of the first *international* story, "Traveling Companions," is modeled on Minny, and anticipates Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer and Milly Theale—those "heroines of the scene" who were "absolutely afraid of nothing," who lived "with enough sincerity and enough wonder," and also "with such lightness of forms, so inconsequently grave at the core" (*Autobiography* 506-510).

Conclusion

As can be seen, we cannot understand James's work fully without a deep knowledge of the fine work that his *Autobiography* is. *The Middle Years* was not finished; so, to find out the end of the story we must look into the pages of his works. Despite his reasons for not finishing the third volume—he was sick and depressed because of the First World War—he instinctively knew that he had already said everything he needed. James was convinced that the artist disappeared in his work, and that the life of a writer ceased to be interesting when Art became the only reason for his life, his own personality being no longer interesting as theme of fiction. As he explained in some of his autobiographical stories about writers, such as "The Figure in the Carpet," "The Death of the Lion," and "The Lesson of the Master," the essential life of the artist is kept in his work, where he shows distinctly his genius. Thus, all his books form a kind of supreme autobiography which keep every important event until the end of his life.

In short, with his *Autobiography* Henry James finally reached the summit of his literary career, by combining all his previous artistic achievements in a synthesis of the past and present, and by using a new literary form, which permitted not only these conflicting frameworks to exist but also both views to be contained simultaneously, since for him

> ... to knock at the door of the past was in a word to see it open to me quite wide—to see the world within begin to compose with a grace of his own. (*Autobiography* 3)

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