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THE CLASSICISM OF HENRY JAMES: HIS HELLENISM & CONNECTION TO ROME[1]

In one study on Henry James and the classics, Michael Clark duly notes "James's lifelong preoccupation with ancient Greek culture" (210). In another, Aladár Sarbu claims that "Hellenism for James, may not be the most appropriate phrase, as his classical background is overwhelmingly Roman in character" (258). Both scholars represent the current dichotomy in Jamesian criticism concerning the Master's relationship with Greece and Rome. As would be expected from such research, much analysis focuses on his fiction, yet a closer look at the American's education and travels in addition to new evidence from personal letters only recently published can shed more light on this topic. By taking all of these factors into consideration, it becomes evident that the classicism of the novelist is not particular to one culture or the other. Rather, his art contains a more balanced outlook with regards to the ancients, one incorporating Greek ideals as they were perceived through Roman eyes.

[1] I would like to thank Dr. Ve-Yin Tee for proofreading an earlier draft of this paper.

The Education of Henry James

The classical learning of James has already been covered by Elizabeth Block who emphasizes the Latin half of his schooling. It is true that already by the age of 15 his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry, the future classicist who would publish *A History of Greek Literature* in 1890, confirms in a memorandum that "[James] and I read together at Mr. [Reverend W. C.] Leverett's school a fair amount of Latin literature. Like Shakespeare he had less Greek" (Lubbock 1: 8). Yet James sought more Greek instruction as a letter he wrote to Perry a year later reveals: "I fully intended to study Greek when I came here [at M. Rochette's in Switzerland], but I have not now the time, I shall commence it as soon as I possibly can" (*CLHJ*, *1855-1872* 1: 28). He was also exposed to Greek drama by the time he attended the Academy of Geneva, to which he equates his scientific lectures with "tragedy" and the literary ones with "bright comedy," "the professor in each case figuring the hero, and the undergraduates, […], partaking in an odd fashion of the nature at once of troupe and spectators" (*Au* 245).

The James family later moved to Bonn, Prussia, where Henry finally received his opportunity to study Greek under "one Doctor Humpert Latin and Greek Professor at the Gymnasium here" who "is a pleasant genial man with very little force of character, and more book-learning,

that is knowledge of Greek and Sanscrit [sic] than anything else" (*CLHJ*, *1855-1872* 1: 51). In yet another letter to Perry, he writes that "[t]hey [his classmates] study naught else than Latin and Greek" (59) at the Gymnasium whose library "has scarcely any but the Ancient Authors" (60). Returning to America, James studied "English, Classical [Languages/Civilization], French, German, Spanish, Drawing and Music" at the Berkeley Institute in Newport.[2] William James recognized his brother's love for antiquity persuading him to go to Germany because that was where "really classical and cosmopolitan literature" was written (*CLHJ*, *1855-1872* 2: 14).[3]

James kept in touch with the academic world of classical studies even after completing school. He was on friendly terms with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1: 161-62, 171, 197, 333, 339), Harvard Professor of French and Spanish from 1836 to 1854, whose poetry contains classical elements such as the epic dactylic hexameter in "Evangeline." He knew Richard Chevenix Trench, the Archbishop of Dublin, who was also a philologist (*1872-1876* 1: 210, 226, 358). Dr.

[2] From the 24 May 1862 edition of the newspaper *Mercury* in Newport, as found in Harlow (8).

[3] Mr. Brooke of "Travelling Companions" "thought, I lived, I ate and drank, in Latin, and German Latin at that" (*CS1* 538), while although studying in English, Morgan Moreen, "The Pupil," uses a Greek-German lexicon (*CS3* 730).

Thomas Inman, who published in archaeology and mythology, was his doctor in Liverpool (221, 222, 225, 335). Among the friends of the family, Charles Eliot (translator of Dante's *Divine Comedy*) of the Nortons shared James's passion for the classics (Edel *Henry James* 1: 210). He introduced him to Emilia Pattison who was married to Mark Pattison, a classical scholar (*CLHJ*, *1855-1872* 1: 302, 343). James was on good terms as well with Charles Callahan Perkins, an art critic who lectured on Greek and Italian art and engraving several times in the 1870s at Lowell Institute in Boston (343). During his first trip to Europe as an adult, James went "to hear Ruskin lecture at University College on Greek Myths" (236), and socialized with the art and social critic as well (245, 256-57). He listened to William Morris read out his version of the myth of Bellerophon (238, 246), and travelled across the continent visiting the ancient sites and classical museums.

The impact of this classical immersion surfaces in James's fiction. In "A Day of Days," for instance, Thomas Ludlow, who is "[b]orn in one of the lower strata of New York society" (*CS1* 107), considers himself "not educated. I know no Greek and very little Latin" (120). Conversely, Miss Henrietta Congreve of "Osborne's Revenge," presumably rich and from New York, like her creator, is believed to be "wonderfully clever, and that she read Latin and Greek" (375). The "*bourgeoise* Egeria" (749),

Serafina, "The Madonna of the Future," complains how Theobald often "talks away, without stopping, on art and nature, and beauty and duty, and fifty fine things that are all so much Latin to me" (757). In "Benvolio," the Professor "taught [his daughter] the Greek alphabet before she knew her own, and fed her with crumbs from his scholastic revels" (*CS2* 104). From "An International Episode," "[t]here was Lady Jane Grey we have just been hearing about, who went in for Latin and Greek and all the learning of her age" (382). Laura Wing of "A London Life" "wondered what her sister supposed Miss Steet taught them – whether she had a cheap theory that they were in Latin and algebra" (*CS3* 449). And Morgan Moreen, "The Pupil," learns Latin (718, 720) and Greek (730) from his teacher Pemberton.

The most telling inclusion of classical education in Jamesian fiction is through "Gabrielle de Bergerac," who persuades her brother to hire the Latin tutor, Coquelin, who had half a dozen little copies of the Greek and Latin poets, bound in yellow parchment, which, as he said, with a second shirt and a pair of white stockings, constituted his whole library. He had carried these books to America, and read them in the wilderness, and by the light of camp-fires, and in crowded, steaming barracks in winter-quarters. He had a passion for Virgil. M. Scarron was very soon dismissed to the cupboard, among the dice-boxes and old packs of cards,

and I was confined for the time to Virgil and Ovid and Plutarch, all of which, with the stimulus of Coquelin's own delight, I found very good reading. […] He wrote a very bad hand, but he made very pretty drawings of the subjects then in vogue, – nymphs and heroes and shepherds and pastoral scenes. (*CS1* 438)

She also introduces her nephew M. le Chevalier to Plutarch in French (436), a noteworthy emphasis because, as the author of the *Parallel Lives* of Greeks and Romans, he was the first to integrate the study of both classical cultures. James was certainly read in the Greek biographer. The statues of the Grand-Dukes of Tuscany in Livorno are "represented, that is dressed, or rather undressed, in the character of heroes of Plutarch" (*CTW2* 568); Cousin Maria of "Mrs. Temperly" is "a woman of Plutarch" (*CS3* 176); and there is an allusion to the Greek's biography of Theseus in "The Modern Warning" (430; see also Tintner *Pop* 127). The ancient author's fusion of both Greek and Roman societies was a technique that attracted the American writer who was fond of comparing and contrasting his own times with the classical world.

James was much more proficient in Latin, but he was at the same time very interested in things Greek. A complete compilation of all the research done on Jamesian Hellenism is a Herculean task beyond the scope here, but it should suffice to mention that the American's tendency

to Hellenize his writings is well documented. Dorothy Bethurum was the first critic in 1923 to explain the author in these terms when analyzing Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady*: "The meaning of her development is, in fact, this moral growth, for with James, as with the Greeks, wisdom and virtue are synonymous" (327-28). Of his novels in general she concluded that "[u]nless the moral sense be thoroughly bound up in the sense of the beautiful, as in the case of the Greeks, it can never be wholly sufficient" (330). Specific Greek authors were singled out in 1949 when Leon Edel, noticed the particular use of Euripides' *Orestes* in the dramatic version of *The Other House* (*CP* 679), and Ray B. West Jr. and Robert Wooster Stallman noted elements of classical Greek theatre, namely comedy, in "The Liar" (212). More recently in 2004, Raymond Benoit has argued that the Platonic discourse of reality versus appearance plays itself out in "The Beast of the Jungle" through John Marcher and May Bartram. This aspect is certainly reminiscent of the conversations between the protagonist "of the semi-classical" (Curtsinger 22) "Benvolio" concerning "the absolute [Plotinus' "The One"] and the relative [Plato's *Protagoras*] with the Professor" (*CS2* 111) who is "a devout Neo-Platonist" (103) and whose daughter goes to live in the Antipodes (124-25), non-existent islands first coined by Plato in *Timaeus* (63a). The Antipodes make another appearance in one of James' very last

publications, "France" (9 June 1915; *CTW2* 773), in which he also compares the eponymous country to ancient Greece, "the most golden aspect of antiquity" (775). Indeed, for over eight decades critics have been demonstrating how Hellenism is present throughout the Jamesian canon.

James's Travels

It is surprising to note that such an avid traveler as Henry James (*cf.* the two-volume *Collected Travel Writings* compiled by the Library of America series) never visited Greece, not even the southern third of his beloved Italy, the old *Magna Graecia* (Great Greece). There are three main reasons for this anomaly, the first two being rather practical. One was that travel around the western half of Europe in James's day was much more established and therefore convenient than in the eastern half because there already existed a network of expatriate communities. Another was that on his first voyage to Europe as an adult James had intended to go as far south as Sicily (*CLHJ*, *1855-1872* 2: 63, 110), but by the time he reached Florence he was experiencing a severe case of constipation which forced him to reconsider his itinerary (137, 152-53). Thanks to medication prescribed by an Irish doctor practicing in the Tuscan city (167, 171), he was able to enjoy Rome and even Naples, but

by 8 November 1869 Sicily was no longer in his plans (180). He had perhaps decided to take the precaution of scaling down his trip because his health might still have been precarious. In all of the subsequent trips to Europe, never again would James go further south than Naples, the reason for this being complex.

Naples was a major city in antiquity and even more so in Magna Graecia, being colonized by the Greeks and therefore quite Hellenized. James first visited it in 1869, describing the scenery to his mother in a letter interestingly in Latin literary terms:

> On each side of me the bay stretches out its mighty arms – holding in one hand the sullen mass of Vesuvius + in the other, veiled in a mist which shadows forth the dimness of their classicism, the antique sites of Baiae + Cumae – all haunted with Horatian + Virgilian memories" (230).

Although he appreciated the Greek artifacts at the national museum, he rather abruptly mentions that he had also "been to Paestum + seen the Greek temples" (231). He would not publish a travelogue about the area until the first decade of the twentieth century, "The Saint's Afternoon and Others," which contains very few references to its ancient Greek past in comparison to the Roman era (*CTW2* 600-19).

The same can be said about the representation of the city and its environs in his fiction. One of the "Travelling Companions," Mr. Brooke, sees the usual tourist sites there including the museum and Pompeii (*CS1*

537-38) – a Roman not Greek archaeological site. In James's very next published tale, "A Passionate Pilgrim," the narrator describes Nuremberg as "so forcible an image of the domiciliary genius of the past" (563), comparing it to Pompeii. Although *Roderick Hudson* visits and talks "about the Naples Museum, the Aristides, the bronzes, the Pompeian frescoes" (*N1* 361), he does not go into any details. Part of "Georgina's Reasons" is set in the southern Italian city where Mildred Theory "poured forth floods about Magna Graecia" (*CS3* 29) and "knew about the statues in the museum, about the excavations at Pompeii, about the antique splendor of Magna Graecia" (30). The next creative use of area occurs in *The Awkward Age* where Mr. Longdon carries on with Mitchy about "the Virgilian associations of the Bay of Naples" (*N4* 963). Finally, "The Beast in the Jungle" is also set around Pompeii. Despite the bay area being more closely connected with ancient Greek culture, James saw the region primarily through Roman eyes.

Sicily, although technically not part of Magna Graecia, was also deeply Hellenized if not Greek. In an article about Ernest Renan visiting southern Italy in 1875, James quotes from one of the Frenchman's letters describing how Sicily and Greece are still quite similar owning to their shared history (*LC2* 628-29). Although James agrees that "the great ruins

– Syracuse,[4] Agrigentum, and Taormina –" of which "M. Renan [writes] is of course very eloquent and interesting," the American was not sufficiently tempted enough to experience the island and its Greek atmosphere first-hand. In fact, the previous year James was tempted to take a voyage back home that would stop "at Naples, Messina + other picturesque places" (*CLHJ*, *1872-1876* 2: 129), but that trip never materialized. Furthermore, when reviewing another French author, Auguste Laugel and his *Italie, Sicile, Bohême: Notes de Voyage*, James sees Sicily in its Roman provincial context ("this once imperial island" [*LC2* 471]), in spite of the fact that most of "its shrines and temples" are Greek.

Sicily, like Naples, hardly shows up on James's fictional radar either, and when it does it again is viewed through Roman-tinted glasses. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, much of which is set in Rome, the characters consider going to Greece and Sicily, but the few who do reveal little that is worthwhile about their voyages (Chapters 31, 38, 39). Adrian Frank in "The Impressions of a Cousin" travels to Sicily, but the reader learns nothing more from the entry of the narrator's diary, which is written in the Italian capital (*CS*2 721). The sister of Laura Wing in "A London Life"

[4] The tasteful Benvolio sometimes wears "an antique Syracusan coin, by way of a pin, in his cravat" (*CS2* 84).

(mentioned earlier), Selina Wing Berrington, has further connections to the classics as well as to the island. Her first name is the Romanized Greek (Σελήνη) for moon, and at one point she sings to her children and is thus likened to Saint Cecilia (*CS3* 469), the patroness of musicians who came from Rome and died in Sicily.[5] Like Magna Graecia then, all things Sicilian despite their Greek associations are seen from a Roman perspective.

It is tempting to go as far as to interpret in James a preference for Roman civilization, a view that might be supported by the short story "A Bundle of Letters." In it, the German professor Dr. Rudolf Staub compares two Americans in rather derogatory, Magna Graecian terms. The first, Louis Leverett, "presents all the characteristics of a period of national decadence; reminding me strongly of some diminutive Hellenised Roman of the third century" (*CS2* 515). The second is Miranda Hope who "produces nothing but evil, and her tastes and habits are similarly those of a Roman lady of the lower Empire" (516). But perhaps these descriptions reveal more about James' view of Germans, rather than of ancient Greece or Rome whose characteristics, as can be seen, overlap without strain.

[5] There is a church in Rome dedicated to the saint where Rowland Mallet meets Christina Light and Assunta, and they gossip about Roderick Hudson who, at this end of this seventh chapter titled "Saint Cecilia's," as Mallet learns, has left for Naples.

Greece proper and the eastern Mediterranean were on James's itinerary as well, but once more he never went there. Travelling with some friends of the family in 1873, James wrote to his sister Alice about how Edmund Tweedy did not take to his wife Mary Temple Tweedy's suggestion of visiting Athens in the winter (*CLHJ*, *1872-1876* 1: 264). As usual, this lack of Greek travelling experience is mirrored in his fiction. The earliest example appears when the "Travelling Companions" want to go to Greece (*CS1* 523, 532), but the reader never discovers whether they do. The Countess of "Benvolio" "was in Italy, in Greece, in the East, in the Holy Land, in places and situations that taxed the imagination" (*CS2* 120), but those images are never described. In "Pandora" Count Otto Vogelstein "wondered what form of culture Mr. and Mrs. Day had brought back from Italy, Greece, and Palestine (they had travelled for two years and been everywhere)" (830), but the typically Jamesian picturesque depictions that brought his American, English and French settings so alive are lacking in this tale. Indeed, the French rural landscape to the naïve American Lewis Lambert Strether of *The Ambassadors* is at first "practically as distant as Greece" (*N6* 374). The great ancient Greek metropolises of Smyrna and Constantinople surface in "Eugene Pickering" (*CS2* 48-81), "Georgina's Reasons" (*CS3* 32) and "The Chaperon" (845), but predictably are only mentioned. In fact,

Smyrna "of all places" (Putt 92; Wagenknecht 183) is considered by Adeline R. Tintner to be even "burlesque, limericklike" (*Book* 27).[6] This confusion among readers as well as the inconsistency between his interest in ancient Greece on the one hand and his not seeing its modern manifestation on the other may be explained by returning to Italy and its capital.

Henry James travelled most of Western Europe and North America, where he found Italy by far the most inspiring non-English speaking country (Wright 208, 217). Of all the cities he visited Rome was his favourite, and this fact has not escaped critics either.[7] One observation that both James W. Tuttleton (43) and Agostino Lombardo (230-32) made at *The James Family and Italy: A Symposium* in April 1988 (and John Lyon 142-54 and Elzbieta Foeller-Pituch agree) was that the Italy James knew was only marginally historical and rather more artistically metaphorical – the eternal city being its prime example. James' knowledge of the classical past, however, should not be underestimated.

[6] James satirically refers to this place once more in "A New England Winter" where Rachel Torrance dresses like "a Smyrniote" (*CS3* 96).

[7] See Bisztray "The Role of Rome in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and Henry James's *Daisy Miller*," Block "The Rome of Henry James," Foeller-Pituch "Henry James's Cosmopolitan Spaces: Rome as Global City," Lucas "Manliest of Cities: The Image of Rome in Henry James," Lyon "Henry James and the anxiety of Rome" and Stone "Henry James and Rome" for just the major studies in English.

A look at the study of ancient history demonstrates how well James understood the Mediterranean.

A Tale of Two Cultures

Rome was of course the largest city in its empire, which is traditionally divided linguistically and culturally into the Latin West and Greek East. The Roman historian Ramsey MacMullen, however, argues that the capital had the largest number of Greek speakers in the entire Mediterranean, even more than huge eastern metropolises such as Alexandria (345 n.12). Greek ideas permeated Roman civilization to such an extent that the Romans can be considered as the first neoclassicists. With current research in cultural studies becoming ever more specialized, the notion of antiquity as Greco-Roman tends to be overlooked. James and other contemporary artists would not have made similar hair-splitting differences between both peoples. This stance is best exemplified by the way he treats classical mythology.

In "The Last of the Valerii," set in Rome, almost all the deities in it are called strictly by their Roman names: Hercules (*CS1* 804), Minerva (806, 807), Ceres (806), Bacchus, Venus (807, 808, 822), Juno (808-12, 819-22), Proserpine (811), Jupiter (817), and Diana (819-20). The only exception is Mercury (817) who is referred to also as his Greek

equivalent Hermes (814-15).[8] The most important of these is Juno, of which a statue is unearthed becoming an obstacle in the marriage of the international couple who are the protagonists of the tale. The Italian husband, Count Valerio, is so mesmerized by it that he begins to neglect his American wife who, in order to save their relationship, reburies the statue. Years later Valerio, still possessing its hand as a relic, receives a visitor one day who questions him as to whether it was Roman. "'A Greek,' said the Count, with a frown" (827).

The statue is indeed "in the large and simple manner of the great Greek period" (808). So why does the narrator, the godfather of the countess, never refer to it as Hera, Juno's Greek manifestation, interchangeably as he does with Hermes/Mercury? There are two schools of thought concerning this matter. M. Clark suggests that Valerio, descending from the Romans, is sexually repressed like his ancestors were, at least in comparison to the more liberal Greeks. This is the reason why the messenger god, whose phallus was a popular symbol in his Greek aspect but not in his Roman one, is referred to as both Hermes and Mercury – that is, to emphasize Valerio's dilemma (211-12). The other theory, as Suzi Naiburg puts forth, is that

[8] In "The Velvet Glove" as well, Diana (*CS5* 756) is also called by her Greek name Artemis (741).

> The Count's identification of the statue as Greek rather than Roman indicates that his affinities are more with Hera than with Juno, with the more poetic and older religious tradition of the Greeks than with the more functional, civic, and secular tradition of the Romans. The Greeks personified their gods and goddesses and developed a rich literature and mythology about them. The Romans were more practically and politically oriented; their deities were more functionally defined. (160)

While both of these explanations carry considerable weight, there may be another more encompassing factor.

For James Greece and Rome were so alike in many ways that the need to make such a differentiation artistically at times did not matter. As Nathalia Wright noted, citing "The Author of *Beltraffio*" in particular, James derived his Hellenism from Italy (223). The large amount of time that he spent there coupled with the vast extent to which scholars see his work as being influenced by ancient Greek literature certainly lends credence to this connection. Furthermore, ancient Rome encompassed both Greek and Latin cultures, making it one of the first and largest cosmopolitan cities ever. Himself a cosmopolite, this was certainly one reason why James was attracted to the capital whose international status never really fell with its empire, at least not in his eyes (Foeller-Pituch). In other words, the proverbial eternal city was for him universal as well.

As James wrote in a letter on 16 April 1882 to his friend Isabella Gardner:

> I am a Greek as I admire you – & a Christian Martyr as you persecute me. You remind me of a Roman lady of the Decadence, at the Circus: I myself being the Christian Martyr! I am not at all Roman – I am Greek! (Tintner *Pop* 109).

A. R. Tintner simply interprets this classical reference as “the Greek material combining with that of the time of the Roman decadence, when the early Christians were martyrs.” Since this letter was written about the time of the tales “The Siege of London” (1883) and “Lady Barberina” (1884), both of which contain many ancient allusions in her opinion, she quickly concludes that the Master “tosses off the two groups of matter that he is handling to produce these rather indirect tributes to classical legends.” When dealing with the classics, James did not toss anything off – directly nor indirectly. As a result of his classical, albeit mostly Roman, education and Italian travels, James demonstrates a firm understanding that the Greek and Roman cultures both complemented each other. Rome and her literary exponents represented for him the culmination of that union, hence one reason why he did not feel the need to travel further south in Italy nor east in the Mediterranean. Like Dante who had Virgil guide him through Hell, James had the Latin classics as his cicerone for the literary odyssey that was his career whose destination was Greek in spirit.

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