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David James

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and the Future of Picturing

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DAVID JAMES

Shared Impressions: Thomas Hardy, Henry James, and the Future of Picturing

Pondering the titular alternatives for his account of returning to American shores, Henry James expressed with a mixture of resignation and mild envy his disappointment that 'The Return of the Native' was already off-limits. Glossing the volume in 1904 for George Harvey, then editor of *The North American Review*, James conferred advance praise upon his work-in-progress, such that he could 'believe' himself 'able' to produce 'the best book (of social and pictorial and, as it were, human observation) ever devoted to this country'.¹ This self-aggrandisement then subsides with James's elegant admission that the most befitting name for a work of this 'form and tone and feeling'—so 'absolutely personal to myself and proper to my situation'—had long been debarred. While envisaging the imminent completion of what eventually would become *The American Scene* (1907), James skirts professional resentment with a measured sense of acceptance that curiously dissociates him from Hardy across time, as though he regards his English counterpart as less than contemporary and more a distant precursor from a receding bucolic age:

If Thomas Hardy hadn't long ago made that impossible I should simply give the whole series of papers the title of *The Return of the Native*. But as that's out of the question I have found myself thinking of, and even liking better—*The Return of the Novelist*—if that doesn't seem too light and airy or free and easy. It *describes* really my point of view—the current of observation, feeling etc., that can float me further than any other.²

While he admits that Hardy simply got there first, in a more oblique fashion James also acknowledges that this would-be title for his 'Impressionistic papers' is equally apposite for their respective homecomings,³ signalling affinities in style and sensibility alike. For Hardy's title also

denotes a certain persona as well as a mode of passage, naming temperament itself in accordance with retrogression. And as such, its twin logic exhumes patterns of unarticulated correspondence for these chroniclers of indigenous re-entry, patterns that extend to the level of technique, disclosing alliances between their intimate troping of the emigrant's unsettling reintegration.

Affinities alone, though, are scarcely enough to obviate rivalries or smooth over the particularities of commitment and approach. In the year in which he published *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy notoriously characterized Henry James as 'the Polonius' among contemporary novelists;⁴ a befitting riposte, perhaps, to James's own patronizing evaluation from 1874 that Hardy's allegiances to outmoded pastoral had manifested themselves in the inadequacies of 'composition' and 'proportion'.⁵ And even a brief survey of the critical heritage reveals that far more has been made of these writers' thinly veiled competitiveness than of their understated congress as practitioners. There has been a tendency for critics to offset Hardy against James with the help of cursory distinctions of a stylistic kind, or contrast their respective filiations with early Anglo-American modernists. Extending Impressionism's lessons in obliquity, James's fiction is seen to breach Victorian conventions of scenic description and authorial intrusion to develop modes of reflectoral, free-indirect discourse that Hardy never quite achieved. Having recourse to such monolithic paradigms of artistic originality on an international scale, while eliding the way influences travel dynamically across period-boundaries, this comparative model cannot do justice to either writer's singularity nor to the methods that affiliate their ambitions for novelistic form.

Indeed, in the Spring preceding his terse review of *Madding Crowd*, we find a New York James posing in *The Nation* as a doyen of intercontinental travel, whose vocabulary of optical discernment recycles the very level of effusive description that he would counsel Hardy to restrain. Subsequently appearing in *Transatlantic Studies* as 'Venice to Strasburg' and reissued with his corpus of other Venetian meditations in *Italian Hours* (1909), 'Venice: An Early Impression' highlights the alliances that James was inconspicuously forging with Hardy's own spatial pictorialism. From his admiration (and 'envy') of a fellow countryman at work on a canvass in St. Mark's Cathedral,⁶ James gestures to the wider implications of extrapolating essence from sensation—of accessing through the artistry of observation the multitudinous materiality of scenes that envelop the senses. There is an impulse behind James's account to shift modes of memorialising the city: to offer less a report than a testimony