

Hawthorne and James: Nineteenth-Century American Views of the Old World

As we read the opening paragraphs which describe Benjamin Franklin's appearance before the House of Commons on January 29, 1774 in H.W. Brands book The First American, we are reminded that for many of the original colonists, Franklin's opinions were similar to their own:

Franklin proudly called himself a Briton. In doing so he did not deny his American birth, for he considered Americans to be as fully Britons as the English, Scots, and Welsh. He delineated for all who would listen the glorious future of Britain in North America, a future joining American energy to the British tradition of self-government (6).

As Franklin learned that day in the House of Commons, and later generations of Americans were to learn, separation from the Old World would come whether they wished for it or not. Yet, the separation would produce a nation that longed for its ties to the Old World, ties that were not only political and social but contained elements of culture, history, and art.

The separation from the Old World produced a tension in minds of Americans when thinking of Europe. On the one hand, the United States was indebted to the Old World for its cultural heritage, arts, and history. On the other hand, the United States was the land of opportunity, republicanism, and a fluid social structure; ideals which were opposed to the class societies, rigid social conventions, and monarchies that dominated the European Continent at the time of the American Revolution and for several decades thereafter.

This tension between the revolutionary ideals of the New World and the hidebound traditions of the Old World is reflected in the writers of the middle to late nineteenth century. In his book The Image of Europe in Henry James, Christof Wegelin notes that American writers tended to be ambivalent towards Europe and that they portrayed the difference between these two worlds in their works. Wegelin notes that James Fennimore Cooper wrote about

...the evils of aristocratic "systems" of government ... and the refinements of aristocratic society...With all his bellicose independence he illustrated... an ambivalence which was typical

of the American attitude toward Europe. ... Cooper's theory of aristocracy was part of a traditional American distinction between an "artificial" aristocracy of birth and a "natural" aristocracy of worth, or talent, or merit...(16).

Reacting to the tendency of American authors to vilify European society, Henry James attempted to see beyond the Old World versus New World dichotomy and to produce a more balanced picture of life in the Old World; a life which could provide a sense of connectedness which was lacking in the United States.

James, like many writers visiting Europe in the middle to late nineteenth century, was initially attracted to those scenes which he read about while attending school, as witnessed in a letter which he composed to his brother, William, on his arrival in Rome: "Here I am...in the Eternal City...From midday to dusk I have been roaming the streets...At last-for the first time-I live! It beats everything; it leaves the Rome of your fancy-your education-nowhere" (Gale, 158) As he made his way through Italy, he composed a series of travel pieces which were intended to serve as guides for tourists and readers at home. The practice of using serious pieces as a sort of traveler's guide to European destinations, and in particular, Italy, was established several years previously, with the publication of Hawthorne's The Marble Faun.

In his preface to The Marble Faun, Hawthorne notes, much as James did, that the initial impressions of Italian life found their way into his work:

In re-writing these volumes, the Author was somewhat surprised to see the extent to which he had introduced descriptions of various Italian objects, antique, pictorial, and statuesque. Yet these things fill the mind, everywhere in Italy, and especially in Rome, and cannot be easily kept from flowing out upon the page, when one writes freely, and with self-enjoyment (3).

The practice of writing pieces which combined literature with a kind of travel guide served several useful purposes: it allowed armchair readers to experience the vicarious thrill of visiting a country that they had never seen; it allowed Americans to acquire a sense of the culture and history of Europe as

seen through the eyes of a famous author; and perhaps more importantly, provided the origin of many of the customs, beliefs, and practices that were adapted for use in the New World.

Life in Europe could also be used as a backdrop for a type of romantic escapism that would appeal to readers in the United States. Once again turning to Hawthorne's preface to The Marble Faun, we learn that the writer sought a "...sort of fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon, as they are, and must needs be, in America" (6). Umberto Mariani, commenting on the use of European scenes as a backdrop to the fiction of James in The Italian Experience of Henry James, notes that James's early short stories and travel essays are marked by "romantic distortion and consequent exaggerated enthusiasm" (238).

Taking the notion of romantic settings a step further, works such as The Marble Faun and The Last of the Valerii, dealt with mythic subjects, which exposed readers to the ancient stories and myths in the countries in which these myths originated. The use of myth in these fictional works tends to provide yet another level of connection to the Old World for readers in America: a connection that reaches back in time to mankind's origins. At the same time, the use of myth was a safe way to establish a common ground between the Old and New Worlds: neither world could claim an exclusive right to the use of myth. For while the classic myths may have originated in Greece and Italy, their stories resonated in the minds of nineteenth century readers, and could be thought of as common property on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the case of The Marble Faun, the central myth is that of the creation and fall of man. Donatello is seen as a "natural man" and is described prior to the killing of the model as being somewhat dim-witted, possessing no strong moral virtues, and yet full of a vitality and originality that is lacking in the American characters in the novel. Miriam, remarking on Donatello's character says "...no Faun in Arcadia was a greater simpleton than Donatello. He

has hardly a man's share of wit, small as that may be. It is a pity that there are no longer any of this congenial race of rustic creatures, for our friend to consort with!" (7).

After Donatello's killing of the model, his innocence is lost and he becomes a civilized man. Kenyon, visiting Donatello at his estate at Monte Belli, notes the change that has occurred in his friend's character; a change that is meant to remind the reader of Adam's fall.

Nothing else made Kenyon so sensible of a change in Donatello, as his newly acquired power of dealing with his own emotions, and, after a struggle more or less fierce, thrusting them down into the prison-cells where he usually kept them confined. The restraint which he now put upon himself, and the mask of dull composure which he succeeded in clasping over his still beautiful, and once faun-like face, affected the sensitive sculptor more sadly than even the unrestrained passion of the preceding scene. It is a very miserable epoch, when the evil necessities of life, in our tortuous world, first get the better of us so far, as to compel us to attempt throwing a cloud over our transparency (250).

For James, the central myth employed in The Last of the Valerii is that of Pygmalion, the ancient sculptor whose love for his creation caused the goddess Venus to pity him and grant life to his statue. The protagonist of this story, Count Camillo Valerio, is initially described as possessing "no great quickness of wit," and of being "perhaps a little stupid;" later in the story, Count Valerio is described as being "the natural man" (89, 95). His beliefs tend to those of the pagan, and the reader is not terribly surprised that when an archeological dig uncovers a statue of Juno, the Count feels a compulsion to worship the ancient deity. Indeed, it is the discovery of the statue that forms a link to the myth of Pygmalion, a myth that James updates to nineteenth century Italy.

The attraction of the ancient gods is not limited to the Count; in this fragment of a discussion between the narrator and the archeologist, we learn that "There's a pagan element in all of us, - I don't speak for you, illustrissimi forestieri, - and the old gods have still their

worshippers. The old spirit still throbs here and there, and the Signor Conte has his share of it” (115).

By the end of the short story, the character of the Count has developed and deepened as a result of his encounter with the ancient goddess. He has grown as a person, both mentally and emotionally, and has become a more complete human being:

He never became, if you will, a thoroughly modern man; but one day, years after, when a visitor to whom he was showing his cabinet became inquisitive as to a marble hand, suspended in one of its inner recesses, he looked grave and turned the lock on it. “It is the hand of a beautiful creature;” he said, “whom I once greatly admired” (122).

It is ironic that the inanimate statue imparts a sense of life to the previously moribund Count, only to be returned to her resting place at the end of the story.

Both James and Hawthorne, while providing scenes which would excite the curiosity of the traveler and appeal to their desire to experience places which they read about, sought more from the European experience than just a travelogue. Both authors attempted to portray the lives of the people whom they encountered in their travels, and to provide some insight into their characters. As Weiglin notes in The Image of Europe in Henry James, the author “...began to analyze his own experience and, particularly, to draw conclusions from his observation of the conflict between American and European manners. And what most distinguishes him from earlier Americans is the gradual deepening of his perceptions” (19). This deepening of perception led James to write stories that would portray an Old World rich in heritage, culture, and history and present this world to his readers. In turn, James expected that his readers would appreciate these values, and would develop a sense of connection with the Old World, as well as a sense of history that was notably absent in the New World. Commenting on James’s evolving

views of life in Europe in The Image of Europe in Henry James, Weiglin observes that for James “...the past lives, not only in the outdated political institutions which ought to be dead...but in the texture of society and of the active lives of individual men and women” (22).

The relation of the Old World with the New, the ancient with the modern, is at the heart of the writings of Hawthorne and James; it is also at the heart of the experience of the United States. In a country of immigrants, some of whom were exiled from the Old World, and some of whom came voluntarily to seek better opportunities, the ambivalence that lies between being connected and remaining apart, is central to the psyche of the nation. It is a psyche that seeks resolution to the sundering, a psyche that longs for a place in history, while at the same time denying the need for such a connection. By resisting superficial, surface impressions of Europe and by attempting to develop a deeper understanding of people, culture, history and myth, both Hawthorn and James attempted to heal the rift between the two hemispheres.

Works Cited

- Brands, H. W. (2000). The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin. New York, Anchor Books.
- Gale, Robert L. (1959). "Henry James and Italy." Nineteenth Century Fiction **14** (2): 157-170.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. (1990). The Marble Faun. New York, Penguin Books.
- James, Henry. (1962). The Last of the Valerii. The Complete Works of Henry James. L. Edel. Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott Company. **3**: 89-122.
- Mariani, Umberto. (1964). "The Italian Experience of Henry James." Nineteenth Century Fiction **19**(3): 237-254.
- Wegelin, Christof. (1958). The Image of Europe in Henry James. Dallas, Southern Methodist University Press.