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David Adams Leeming

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An Interview with James Baldwin on Henry James

by David Adams Leeming, University of Connecticut

James Baldwin has never made a secret of the importance of Henry James to his creative life. Furthermore, the Baldwin-James connection has been well argued by others, particularly by Charles Newman in his "The Lesson of the Master: Henry James and James Baldwin," and by Lyall Powers in "Henry James and James Baldwin: The Complex Figure." Newman suggests that the problem for both Baldwin's and James's characters is "the opacity of their culture and the question of their identity within it," that the "psychological consequence" of their "obscure hurts" is "self-imposed exile," from the vantage point of which America can be more objectively observed: "Paris, France, and Wollett [*sic*], Mass., are not knowable without the other" (53, 63). Powers agrees essentially with Newman. At the center of his article is the whole question of identity as opposed to manners: "the aims of these two writers are much the same: to examine the problem of learning to live in a 'civilized' society whose manners, conventions, prejudices often threaten individual integrity; of coming to terms with that society's demands; and of managing to make the necessary compromises—but without giving up one's essential self, 'that charming conversible infinite thing, the intensest thing we know'" (667).

Early in his essay Powers refers to an article by William Weatherby in which Weatherby mentions a portrait of James owned by Baldwin (651). An interesting story lies behind that portrait, a photograph signed by both John Singer Sargent and Henry James of the portrait painted by Sargent to honor James on his seventieth birthday. The photograph was sent to Baldwin in the early 60s by Michael James, a grandson of William James, who had been impressed by a civil rights speech he had heard Baldwin give in Chicago. As I was Baldwin's secretary at the time and as Baldwin was away, I corresponded with Michael James and tried to convey to him some sense of how appreciative I knew Baldwin would be. When Baldwin returned he was, in fact, deeply moved, and he hung the photograph directly above his writing desk. The picture became a kind of direct link between him and a writer who, as far as Baldwin was concerned, came closer to sharing his concerns than any other. That the gift would be appreciated was no surprise. Baldwin and I had talked many times about James (on whom I was writing a doctoral dissertation under Leon Edel) and Baldwin had lectured several times on *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Ambassadors* for my classes at Robert College in Istanbul.

In everything that he said in those conversations and those lectures, it was clear that his relationship with James was of a very special sort, perhaps of the sort that existed between James and Balzac. James was his standard—the writer he thought of when he thought of the heights to which the novelist's art might aspire.

In recent years Baldwin and I have continued our discussion of Henry James in a series of interviews in connection with a biographical project. The interview that follows is a part of that process. It took place recently at Baldwin's "exile" home in St. Paul de Vence. The interview indicates the validity of the connections pointed to by Newman and Powers; it also indicates how extensive those connections are. When Baldwin talks of Henry James, he does not talk only of a comradeship of expatriates or of the struggle between manners and self; he speaks of James as the writer who shares with him the one essential theme, that of the failure of Americans to see through to "the reality of others"—the same failure that is apparent in America's "race problem" and in the struggles of Lambert Strether to free himself from "innocence."

DL: Jimmy, years ago in the 60s, when I was working for you in New York, I was surprised to find in your files notes for an article on *The Ambassadors*. Do you remember it?

JB: Yes, "The Self as a Journey."

DL: That's right. And not long before that you had come to several of my classes where you talked about Henry James in general and about *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors* in particular. In fact, I first met you in a kitchen in Istanbul where you had just finished the last sentence of *Another Country*, and that evening we spent a great deal of time talking, as I remember, not about *Another Country* but about Henry James.

JB: I remember.

DL: In all of our conversations about James you have always maintained that he was much more than a writer you simply admired—for his style or for his ideas. On the surface *Another Country*, for example, is light years away from *The Portrait*, yet James is quite obviously central to your writing—and necessarily, therefore, to your life. And you have never really told the world why. You never, for instance, finished the article on *The Ambassadors*. I wonder, if you were going to start that article again today, what you would say about James.

JB: Do you still have the article?

DL: No, I think it must still be in your files.

JB: I have it somewhere then.

DL: Well, if you were to pick it up again, what do you suppose you, who have always been deeply involved in contemporary social issues with political and ethnic overtones, would have to tell us about a writer who, after all, wrote about people who were for the most part free of the need to be political or to worry about Black as opposed to White—even in the days just after the Civil War?

JB: It strikes me that what started me on that article was some critic's comment that James had stayed in Europe describing, in effect, tea parties,

while ignoring the most important event of the twentieth century, which was the American rise to dominance in world power. And I thought about that. First of all, I wondered if that was really a subject—the American rise to dominance—and if it were, if it was something to be celebrated. James was the only American writer—literally, for me, the only American writer—who seemed to have some sense of what was later to be called the American Dilemma (it's very hard to be precise about this), who had some sense of the American—I was about to say—personality. But in a way, what distinguishes the Americans from other people is their lack of personality. They have tremendous sincerity—I mean sincerity about everything from Disneyland to football games. They're even sincere, I suppose, about the Russians. They are certainly sincere about what they call the "negro problem" and about the Indians; they're sincere, in fact, about everything. And they understand nothing.

DL: Like Lambert Strether coming to Paris.

JB: Like Lambert Strether coming to Paris—you know, from Woollett, Massachusetts, or wherever he comes from, armed with the sincerity of his assignment. And he really does (he could hardly know any better), he really does think that he is under the obligation to rescue the widow's son from—what?

DL: The fallen woman, the fallen city or . . .

JB: Yes, the fallen woman who exists in the imagination of Woollett, Massachusetts. In fact it turns out to be a woman, fallen or not, and it turns out to be a real relationship. It turns out to be something which has devastated the woman's life, too, because Chad Newsome has also, without knowing it, come with a certain assignment—by which I mean a certain set of assumptions, which in effect make it impossible for Americans to see and experience. To say "Americans" is, of course, to indulge in a vast generality. Here we are, an American novelist and his American friend sitting in Europe talking about another American novelist. But at the moment we will have to use that rather cumbersome term. When we talk about James, we somehow can't avoid it. Maybe we'll clear up the problem later. It seemed to me when I was reading that critic years ago that James, as I watched him in *Daisy Miller*, in *The Turn of the Screw*—even in *The Turn of the Screw*, by the way, which was written, after all, by an American, and *The Wings of the Dove*, and, of course, above all in *The Ambassadors*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Princess Casamassima*—it seemed to me that in each case he was describing a certain inability (like a frozen place somewhere), a certain inability to perceive the reality of others. So that Hyacinth, for example, in *The Princess*, is never a real person to the Princess. He's an opportunity for her to discharge a certain kind of rage, a certain kind of anguish, a certain kind of bitterness about why she's become the Princess Casamassima who had been Christina Light. And she makes Hyacinth, in a sense, pay for the journey she's not been able to pay for. It seems to

me that the Americans—unluckily for them—always have had a receptacle for their troubles, someone or something to pay their dues for them. More so than the Europeans, who had simply Christianity and Race. And even Race has not really been a question in Europe until now, since it used to be Europeans in Europe never saw anyone who didn't look like them. People who worked for them were miles and continents away and, of course, they were redeemed; civilized by the flag and the church, sanctified by the bank. While for the Americans it all occurred on American soil. The only war the Americans ever really fought which made any impact on them was the Civil War, which was presumably about slavery. Actually it wasn't about slavery at all; it was about territory, but the slave was the image in the middle. Hence *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The white American who only became a white American once he crossed the ocean and after some effort—some time and some pain—always had someone else to bear the burden for him: the Indian or the "Nigger." And what might have happened to him, what might have transformed him and made him grow up, happened instead to other people. It happened to Uncle Tom, it happened to Uncas, it didn't happen to him. You know, it would really be quite an extraordinary spectacle, for one sitting on Mars perhaps, to realize that the most powerful nation on Earth—the viceroy of the Universe—is one of the most astounding examples of retarded adolescence in human history. It's not even a tragedy. It's far beyond that. It's a failure to see, a failure to live, a failure to be. Americans do not see me when they look at me, their kinsman—literally blood of their blood, created by them. The price they pay for living is to pretend that I'm not here, and the price they pay for that is not being able to see the world in which they live. What they don't know about me is what they don't know about Nicaragua. And it is not Nicaragua or myself who is doomed.

DL: Strange how *The Ambassadors*, for example, becomes a kind of metaphor for this failure—the failure that Maria Gostrey recognizes as Woollett's, the failure that Lambert Strether has to overcome in his version of "the self as journey."

JB: Exactly; Woollett must learn to see Madame de Vionnet.

DL: Yes. In fact, when Strether comes to Chester on his way to Paris, and he has that crucial conversation with Maria Gostrey, Miss Gostrey is established by James almost as a prophet for America, one who articulates the failure to see. "I bear on my back the huge load of our national consciousness," she says. And she reminds him that his "failure," which he recognizes as "the failure of Woollett," is "general . . . The failure to enjoy." And when Strether preaches much later to Little Bilham about the importance of "living," it's almost as if Strether had become her acolyte.

JB: Yes, and he learns as the novel progresses that to live costs something.

DL: And that if Chad Newsome won't pay the price, then he will have to pay the price for Chad Newsome; that can be a very uncomfortable situation.

JB: But that is what has happened in America.

DL: And to you. It may be that you will have to go back to your Woollett.

JB: You can see that this is what is happening to me. It's why Strether goes back. In principle I could stay here and never go back to Harlem and New York City again. I think that's what I would like to do, in a way. But I can't do it. I can't do it because if I were to avoid the journey back to America I'd be avoiding everything—the people who have produced me (both Black and White), the central reality of my life. And once you do that I don't know what you can write about or what you can write out of. To avoid the the journey back is to avoid the Self, to avoid "life." Finally, you know, writing is a private endeavor—a little bit like making love. But like making love, it has repercussions. You avoid the journey at your peril; you seal yourself off and do something much worse to yourself than the world can do to you. I've always felt that I had no real choice about the journey. In a way I learned about it in the streets. If you're frightened of something in the streets you walk towards it. Turn your back and they've got you.

DL: Like Lambert Strether at the *Cheval Blanc*. He has to learn in that remade Lambinet painting to see that two people have touched and he has to learn to be able to accept that touching—

JB: —as a key to his life—

DL: —before he can live, before he can really do what he's preached to Little Bilham—before he can make the last leg of the journey.

JB: It's terrifying. It seems to me that there's a distance between James and myself. I understand why he died in England as a British subject and seemed to turn his back on America. I understand that very well. But I'm contradicting myself. Or maybe not. I think it's a contradiction twisted into the American inheritance. James became a British subject because he felt that America had failed Europe, essentially.

DL: Because of the World War.

JB: Because of the First World War. In fact, the Americans went into Europe shortly after he died, but that's presumably really not here nor there. Part of the great American problem has always been the conflict between what they call the Old World and what they call the New World. And the identity which James was trying to decipher was involved in that conflict—in that journey, the journey to the New World, under the obligation of carrying the spiritual inheritance of the Old. That spiritual inheritance—that civilization—had never been so questioned until its journey across the ocean and then across the plains.

DL: This reminds me of something you said in a recent interview in a French journal. I think that this is a reasonable translation of the remark. You

said, "I was not black until Europe came to find me in my village. I had the only civilization that a human being can have—that of his village."

JB: Well, to grow up is to be taught by the "village"—to become "civilized" you're taught what is expected of you.

DL: So would I be right in suggesting that you see in James one who, instead of writing about abstractions—about the meaning of white whales or scarlet letters—chose to write about "villages"? As we did not yet know what our village really was, James took his Americans and put them into the European village to see what would happen—to see whether they could find out what they were.

JB: Exactly. And poor Daisy Miller.

DL: And poor Christopher Newman and poor Lambert Strether.

JB: All of them.

DL: Newman goes to the Louvre on this very mission, doesn't he? The very first word he says in French—the only one he knows at that point—and, in fact, the first word he utters in any language in the novel is "*combien*."

JB: Right, "How much?"

DL: And he is asking about a copy, a bad copy of a French painting—"how much?" And he has really come to buy a wife, a little bit of the old village to decorate the new one.

JB: It's terrifying—because it's still true. I don't know quite how to articulate it or follow it through yet, but I know that the aspect of Christopher Newman we are discussing is a vacuum of sorts which can be said to have, in a way, been filled by the American cinema industry—especially in the invention of the movie star. The movie star—the word made flesh, the word made image. All of the horrors, all of the dreams, all of the best and worst of spectacularly lonely people, summed up in the face of John Wayne and Joan Crawford—or Christopher Newman. Perpetual justification is what this is all about—perpetual justification—the sentimentalization of a crime. Of course, after all, I'm describing myself when I talk about Americans. And even if I hated Americans I would not be able to do to them what they do to themselves. The American Dream. Something happened to me once on Skid Row; it was one of the things that drove me out of America. A tramp came up to me—a bum, probably dying of syphilis, toothless, stinking, and said with perfect sincerity—he absolutely meant it—"Don't worry boy, you're just as good as I am." I was between nineteen and twenty years old, and I thought, "My God, he really means that, and I'm here with him; I'm on the streets too, I'm lost too, I stink too. I probably am just as good as he is; I'd better make a move." And death was literally scurrying all around me. My best friend—black—jumped off the bridge at about that time, and I knew why. So I left two years later; I didn't know what was going to

happen to me in Paris, but you can see that I must have been desperate because I came here with forty dollars and a one-way ticket.

DL: Christopher Newman was trying to escape from a kind of death, too. He knew what was happening to him when he narrowly avoided taking vindictive financial revenge on a fellow moneyman before he gave it all up and left for Paris.

JB: Exactly. But remember, I came with only forty dollars.

DL: More like the young Eugene de Rastignac or the young Balzac. What did happen to you in Paris?

JB: I got over something. I managed—insofar as it is ever possible—to step out of the American Dream and begin to find out what was happening to me—Jimmy—not Jimmy the black boy—but Jimmy. Something was happening to me and I wanted to find out what it was; I wanted to find out who I really was.

DL: You wanted not to be an ambassador.

JB: I wanted to become myself, which I could not have done in America—locked in the Dream. I would have died if I had stayed in America. Which is, paradoxically, why I can never really leave, if you see what I mean. You describe your connection from a distance; I realized I was an American once I came to France.

DL: You can't leave something without being conscious of it.

JB: You are connected . . . I pretend I am a poet, and I know that people produced me. People produce you whether they intend to or not; they may hang you high, they may spit on you, but they have produced you, and they have produced you because somehow they needed you, and that's all you have to know. Your obligation is clear; your responsibility is to those people. It's no worse than any other life sentence. It is lonely and frightening, but it is at least clear.

DL: You're sounding like Strether again—and James; aren't you really saying that as a writer—a poet—your obligation is to paint the picture as the picture is?

JB: Insofar as you can perceive it, or dare to perceive it. There are so many things you don't want to see.

DL: Again, like Strether and his re-creation of that Lambinet painting, watching the boat come round the bend.

JB: He doesn't want to see himself in the painting; nobody wants to see that.

DL: And that is what he eventually sees.

JB: That's exactly what he sees. He occupies the empty space in the canvas.

DL: Up to then he had only been a watcher, but he suddenly realizes that the watcher can only be a true witness by being a part of the painting.

- JB: Otherwise, what's he doing there anyway?
- DL: I have a feeling we've come back to the question of depicting one's "village"—of recognizing the obligation. We've come to the question of "manners" in the sense of the novel of manners.
- JB: Yes. It's curious. It appeared to me much later that when I found myself in France I was in a novel of manners, that I had met everybody—especially the Americans—before. So nobody had any real surprises for me—except for myself. Seeing them in France, I was able somehow to leave behind the paranoia and the rage. Those people would never menace me again—in public perhaps, but not in my private self. It was no longer my problem. Try to touch my nephew and I may kill you, but that's nothing to do with color, at all. That's the American trap; it is not mine.
- DL: Isn't this a kind of redefining of an important aspect of the "American Myth"—the whole idea of freedom? I mean, if you had to pick two words that are basic to whatever we mean or Christopher Newman would mean when we speak of the "American Dream," wouldn't they be freedom and, perhaps, innocence?
- JB: Yes, but freedom and innocence are antithetical. You can't have both.
- DL: Is that what Henry James came to Europe to discover, what Newman and later Strether discover? Is that why you came to France—to redefine freedom and innocence?
- JB: Oh, certainly, certainly.
- DL: So, when you speak now of freedom . . .
- JB: I mean the end of innocence. The end of innocence means you've finally entered the picture. And it means that you'll accept consequences too.
- DL: By innocence, then, you mean the false objectivity that gives you the illusion that you can stand outside of something and describe it accurately without touching it, without paying your dues.
- JB: Yes. And I also associate innocence with the role of the victim. The victim is innocent by definition.
- DL: Innocence is enslavement.
- JB: Of course. It's the "general failure"—the failure to touch, to see.
- DL: This is really your subject, and isn't it James's too? James came to France—at least at first—as you did, to find out what it was to be an American. And innocence is always an issue in this journey. James used France in his novels—even long after he had settled in England—almost allegorically. Especially Paris—Paris: for the nineteenth-century American a city of artifice and pleasure, of unbridled sensuality, the city of the fallen woman who isn't really a fallen woman but whom the myth of America sees as a fallen woman because that's what a French woman who can "touch" an American

boy must be. And, of course, the American hero has to pass through the labyrinth that is Paris before he can return home stripped of the kind of innocence you are talking about and somehow possessed—at least in the case of Strether—of a real freedom. You do the same thing. *Giovanni's Room*, for example, is a room into which one must go to learn to touch, to learn to pay one's dues, to exchange innocence for freedom. And as the novel so tragically shows, it's a place that one can choose to escape from. Somehow it's easier to run away than to be closed in with all the smells, the emotions, the debris—with all the demands the room makes on one. That's what makes Strether's victory so wonderful. He is forced to see things in Paris, forced to live in "the room," as it were. And he learns to enjoy it.

JB: He's fascinated by it. But the bill comes in.

DL: And finally he's willing to pay it.

JB: Finally he's willing to pay it, in his own way, the right way for his picture. But you're right. *Giovanni's Room* is about David (not Giovanni) in the same way the *The Ambassadors* is about Strether. *Giovanni* is about what happens to you if you don't tell the truth to yourself. It's about the failure of innocence. *The Ambassadors* is about Strether's struggle with that problem.

DL: The "general failure"—the failure to see through to the "reality of others."

JB: That's it.

DL: *Giovanni's Room* is about the hero who "refuses the call."

JB: Yes, who refuses to step into the picture. It's a telling of David's innocence, the failure of his innocence, and the results of his innocence. The moment he walks out of that room he's condemned to it forever. He will never leave Giovanni's room; the whole earth has become Giovanni's room and will be until the day he dies, because he lied to himself about something sacred—because he wanted to remain innocent.

DL: Like Strether before he confronts the reality of the boat scene.

JB: Yes. That's what *Giovanni* is about. And it takes place in Paris, like *The Ambassadors*, because it couldn't, in my imagination, have taken place anywhere else.

DL: Why not?

JB: Well, it has to do with me. In France I had to live in a kind of vacuum, absolute silence. I didn't speak French, and I couldn't understand a word. So I had to listen to what I had been avoiding. I had to start facing where I really came from, the speech I really spoke, which is much closer to Bessie Smith than it is to Henry James. But as a writer I needed a box to put thoughts in—a model. I couldn't use D. H. Lawrence, for example (I was far too much like him). I had to find someone else, and James became, in a sense, my master. It was something about point of view, something about discipline. And something about the silence in which I myself was

living began to help me because I was able to go back to something in myself in that silence—the silence of living in Paris—which allowed me to write. And *Go Tell It on the Mountain* I could never have written without that silence and without James. I had read Balzac before, and he was helpful. But Balzac was French. The closest thing to a model I could find for the means to order and describe something that had happened to me in the distance—America—was James. I couldn't read Proust. I couldn't use Dostoevsky until I had read all of him. But I was too much like him anyway. James was my key.

DL: The key to your particular journey.

JB: "The Self as a Journey."

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