

Immaculate Conceptions: Henry James and the Private Sphere

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In *Roderick Hudson*, Rowland Mallet remarks that, “One often envies good Catholics” (226). Considering how frequently Catholics good and otherwise appear in James’s writing, it seems natural to wonder whether Mallet is the only one with Catholic envy. Edwin Sill Fussell argues that James finds what one might call the Catholic symbolic exotically “picturesque” and, especially when compared with American Protestantism, irresistibly redolent with a “sense of the past.”¹ James’s prose, Fussell writes, “give[s] off a distinctly Catholic *tone*” (28) as it produces a variety of “sacred seculars or secular sacreds”:

Throughout his career, and in every literary form, [. . .] Henry James habitually and with consummate stylistic felicity referred to ordinary, diurnal, worldly, secular objects, events, emotions, behaviours, and so forth, in the language of religious belief and practice. His religious language is almost always Christian and more often than not specifically Roman Catholic. (37)

What attracts James to Catholicism is, on the surface, its surface—the “[b]eauty of surface, of tone, of detail, of things near enough to touch and kneel upon and lean against” which, as he wrote in *Italian Hours*, reveal the “incongruous presence of a constant intuitive regard for beauty” (251).

James himself might be described thus, as characterized by the “incongruous presence of a constant intuitive regard for beauty.” The incongruity, however, which for James signals the presence of beauty, is not just a matter of surface; it is instead the sign, the product, of the secularized self sacrificed—literally, made sacred, that is, separate from the “profane”—to the discipline of composition (“in

composition alone is positive beauty” [AN 319]). William James, fumbling in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for something nice to say about Catholicism, could have been describing his brother and his increasingly intricate prose, about which he was similarly ambivalent, when he described the special appeal of Catholicism for someone in whom the “aesthetic motive” is paramount:

The inner need is of something institutional and complex, majestic in the hierarchic interrelatedness of its parts [. . .] and at every stage objects for adjectives of mystery and splendor [. . .]. One feels in the presence of some vast encrusted work of jewelry or architecture; one hears the multitudinous liturgical appeal; one gets the honorific vibration coming from every quarter. Compared with such a noble complexity [. . .] how flat does Evangelical Protestantism appear. (459–60)

But it is specifically the delicious non-congruity—no doubt precisely because he is not a Catholic—of his “regard” with these “near enough” objects that makes Catholicism (when it is “good”) a precious private revelation. Henry James characteristically “converts”² this non-congruity to these three aesthetic, psychological, and philosophical purposes: the symbolization of a sensuously objectified, discontinuous self-consciousness secured against the “terrible fluidity” (AN 321) of representation; safety from the oedipal maneuvers of his father’s intrusive Protestant ethic of incarnation (Henry Sr. was, as it were, “against” self-consciousness); and the refusal of “continuity,” the paradigmatic telos of nineteenth-century science, religion, psychology, and spiritualism, all of which Henry James countered by means of his characteristic secular “geometry” of “discrimination,” or, in other words, *discontinuity*.

In an effort to present these ramifying ideas with some clarity and economy, I will focus on the third, that is, the issue of continuity vs. discontinuity, and then briefly suggest how it helps explain and integrate the other two.³ What will emerge, I hope, is a sketch of James’s savvy, counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, and even counter-Jamesian critique of religion, a critique to which his “distinctly Catholic tone” lends a resonant if sometimes perverse irony. Georges Bataille has said that “[w]hat we [all] desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain” (19). My basic point concerning James is that his desire, or at least his method, is the opposite: to inscribe onto an almost unbearably continuous world enough discontinuity to make possible discriminations by means of which the self can know itself, its place, its objects, its duties, and its others, without becoming them.

Bataille saw humans as by nature driven to transgress or transcend through the emotional, religious, and sexual experience of continuity or connection, their real discontinuity, their physical and existential separateness from each other. At a 1910 symposium at which experts in the science of “subconscious phenomena” surveyed their recent achievements in exploring the continuity of consciousness with other psychical registers, Bernard Hart proclaimed that in fact:

The history of all thought has been dominated throughout by [. . .] the endeavor to obtain continuity. The mind abhors discontinuity as

nature is said to abhor a vacuum. It strives to bring every new experience into line with the old, to do away with inexplicable gaps, and to reduce its world to a connected intelligible whole. Mythology, religion, and philosophical systems provide us with numerous examples of this endeavor. Science is nothing but the same trend of thought become coherent and articulate. (103–04)

Whether or not this provides an accurate trans-historical diagnosis of human motivation in general, “continuity” is a term, a concept, a paradigm, that appears ubiquitous in nineteenth-century discourse once one starts noticing it.

To backtrack a bit: religion could be described very generally as the theory and practice of continuity, offering believers various ways to conceive of themselves as connected to, ultimately and eschatologically continuous with, some inclusive higher, larger, better entity or power.⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, new narratives of continuity, especially those proposed by evolutionism, challenged or supplemented those offered by traditional religion. Americans were obliged, and sometimes eager, to diversify their continuity portfolios⁵; indeed one way to define the process of “secularization” might be as a culture’s increasing willingness to get its continuity outside traditional religious contexts (these days, via the connectivity of the internet, for example). Nineteenth-century science narratives increasingly described the natural world as defined by continuity; geology, for example, abandoned catastrophism for gradualism and uniformitarianism. By the end of the nineteenth century, even American evolutionists, who by and large resisted (and continue to resist) full frontal Darwinism well into the twentieth century, acknowledged that a continuous chain connected the inorganic and organic, plant and animal worlds; in 1880 Asa Gray advised an audience at Yale Theological School that even they could not rationally invoke miracle to “assert[] a break in the continuity of natural cause and effect” (63).

Despite or perhaps because of their allegiance to reason, scientists such as Asa Gray, who with William James, F. W. H. Myers and others, cofounded the American Society for Psychical Research in 1884 (Taylor 20), went to extraordinary lengths to prove the continuity of this world with the next, arguing in some cases, as did Stanford geologist Joseph Le Conte, that evolution bridged matter and spirit and kept right on going into the next world.⁶ From transcendentalizing formulations such as Emerson’s invocation of the “Oversoul” as “that Unity [. . .] within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other” (385–86), or Josiah Royce’s idealistic view of individuality as “continuous” with “the all inclusive Individual, God himself” (80), to rapidly expanding modes of material connectivity such as those made possible by railroad, telegraph, and telephone, or the multifarious infusions of freed persons and immigrants to urban “melting pots,” together with the endless narratives of “progress” for which such developments provided “evidence,” the configurations of continuity proliferated explosively throughout the century in ways that provoked hope and fear, exhilaration and anxiety.⁷

William James was thus in good and plentiful company as he expanded his own continuity portfolio throughout the diverse genres of his thought, in each of which he takes his stand on some carefully qualified version of the “more.” To

sum up his affirmation of psychological continuity, one need only recall his description of consciousness as a “stream”: “Within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous” (*Principles* 231). His experience as a psychical researcher led him to conclude that “there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences” (“Confidences” 374). In “What Pragmatism Means,” James wrote that “everything here is plastic”: “New truth [. . .] marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity” (*Writings* 383). He was moved by the religious experiences of others to offer the idea with which he concludes *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that man’s “higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality” (508), “that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self” (515). And so on.

William James does, of course, theorize that the mind perceives discontinuities, or discriminations, as well;⁸ but he affirms, values, finds fruitful, “builds out” from, and warms to continuity in ways he does not with discontinuity, whereas the opposite is the case for his brother Henry. In thus affirming continuity William both revised and expanded, secularized and democratized, his father’s idiosyncratic and dogmatic conception of Incarnation as the absolute continuity and co-dependence of the divine “MORE” with the human less. Creator and creature, as Henry Sr. saw them, were “logically” continuous:

It is logically in fact the very essence of the creative idea, that creation is practically a marriage of Creator and creature, whereby the creature alone spiritually *is*, or becomes infinite in the Creator, while the Creator alone naturally *exists*, or becomes finite, in the creature: so that the creature has at most only a seeming or phenomenal existence *in himself*, even while he has at the same time a most real or absolute and unqualified being *in his Creator*. (*Society* 143)

“In truth, the nature of man is *literally* divine,” Henry James Sr. wrote (*Literary* 205), and the *telos* of American democracy the incarnation of “the *social* spirit in humanity, or the truth of an approaching marriage between the public and private, the universal and the particular interests of the race” (176). Incarnation, he insisted, “is a fact which is rigidly coextensive with nature and history both”; “a fact of rigidly universal dimensions, and no way of individual ones” (*Literary* 394). The “total meaning of Christianity” is “the perfect unition of the Divine and human natures” (*Substance* 241–42), and its destiny in America a “perfected society” “in which every man [. . .] stands indissolubly united with his race” (424).

Such totalizing paternal views did not make selfhood easy business in the James household, but as critics and biographers have pointed out, Henry more easily than William distanced himself from father and “father’s ideas”; whereas William diversified his father’s continuity portfolio, Henry invested in aesthetic discontinuity. Continuity signifies the merger (“union”) of one’s incarnate self with something other; the eros and danger of shared identity; a “more” that might prove too much. Resisting, or managing, continuity requires those arts of self—the struggle for renunciation and transcendence, for salvific, if compensatory,

selfhood—that we recognize as hallmarks of the Jamesian protagonist. In *The American*, French Catholic Claire de Cintré demonstrates this most literally when at the end she immures herself in a convent in order to escape manipulative family members and importunate suitors. What she, being Catholic, performs literally, Puritan Rowland Mallet learned from his deceased mother—“a saint”—to perform psychologically, creating a kind of conventual subjectivity⁹: to “cultivate[] [. . .] a little private plot of sentiment, and it was of this secluded precinct that before her death she gave her son the key” (*RH* 57). James uses the plot of *Roderick Hudson* to dramatize or melodramatize—and then rescue its hero Rowland Mallet from—the potential dangers of leaving the secluded precinct of the discontinuous self to mingle with others. In retrospect, this scenario appears to have been a kind of trial run for James’s later, more complex fictions. In *The Wings of the Dove*, for example, Kate Croy, Merton Densher, and, more poignantly, Milly Theale, choose to risk the perils of sociality and intimacy; each ends up alone.

James defines selfhood as discontinuity from its environs: in *What Maisie Knew*, Maisie fashions a self by controlling “her little stream of life,” ceasing to offer herself as a “boundless receptacle” for parental poisons, instead sealing up within herself “the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment” (42–43). In *The Wings of the Dove*, Merton Densher finds similarly that survival in a world comprised of social beings requires concealing a “consciousness, unseen enough by others” (415).¹⁰ In *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie Verver (James’s most magnificent Catholic, according to Fussell¹¹), secures both her mind and her marriage by an elaborate artfulness dedicated to severing certain continuities (which James here as ever refers to as “communion” [e.g., *GB* 375]) between herself and her father, and between her husband and her father’s wife. In their four-way “community of passion” (282) Maggie clandestinely “bring[s] about a difference, touch by touch” (348).¹²

Maggie’s art, as many have observed, is analogous to that of James himself. When in the preface to the New York Edition of *Roderick Hudson*, James looks back at the book to find a “sweet old overtangled walled garden, a safe paradise of self-criticism” (*AN* 10) in which intertwined or muddled aesthetic and moral issues can in retrospect be separated out from each other, he links the “dramas of discrimination” (*AN* 316) to which he subjects his characters, with those to which he subjects himself. This paradise of self-criticism represents the safe haven reached after having braved those “developments” that “are the very essence of the novelist’s process” (and here I quote familiar lines which will I hope take on new significance), but which “impose on him, through the principle of *continuity* that rides them, a proportionate anxiety” (5, emphasis mine). It is because “[r]eally, universally, relations stop nowhere” that the “problem of the artist is eternally but to draw [. . .] the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so” (5).

Seemingly everywhere in late James, language itself verges, to the minds of many readers, on a maddening hermetic continuity with itself. “The *continuity* of things,” James asserts, “is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; [. . .] this *continuity* is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken” unless, that is, the subject, whether character or artist, breaks it (5, emphasis mine). James’s

works dwell always on the problematics of continuity—on fantasies of continuity—and are, in effect comedies and tragedies, but more usually ironic tragicomedies that dramatize continuity as an apocalyptic threat. In late works such as *The American Scene*, James as the hero of his own narration flirts with epistemological continuity, appearing momentarily to “surrender” to “the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation” (AN 321), as in the famous passages in “New York Revisited” where he is temporarily awash in “confusion carried to chaos for any intelligence, any perception; [in] a welter of objects and sounds in which relief, detachment, dignity, meaning, perished utterly and lost all rights” (AS 83); or when in *A Small Boy and Others* he cherishes a vision of himself as a little boy without “*abords*,” entranced by the “squalor wonderfully mixed and seasoned” overflowing New York’s “rank and rubbishy waterside quarters” (AU 41–42). Such sensory adventures beyond the “*abords*” of intelligence, now thrilling (“squalor wonderfully mixed”), now debasing (“dignity [. . .] lost all rights”), are only significant for one for whom the “drama of discrimination” is paramount.¹³

The myriad continuities of being that seem to call us forth can prove toxic, even lethal, if romantic, even gothic, as in “The Turn of the Screw.” They can seem, even be, desirable, even seductive, yet can also, in such a case, as in *The Sacred Fount*, like some epistemological retrovirus usurp and dissolve the forms required by eros. In *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether suffers his two biggest epistemological emergencies when, having been seduced into letting down his defenses, he finds himself at the mercy of continuity: first, when, thanks to the “deep identities” (289) between Sarah Pocock and her mother—Sarah, in fact, “opening so straight down, as it were, into her mother”—“the shaft thus sunk” from Mrs. Newsome’s end reaches straight across the Atlantic ocean into Strether’s heart (228–29); and second when, thanks to “the beautiful subterfuge of [his] thought and [his] desire,” Strether lapses into an illusory continuity, there in the countryside where simultaneously “it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet” (302), and where, as he “continued in the picture [. . .] all the rest of this rambling day” (305), he wakes up to the fact that continuity with others may be what they have with him, but not what he has, can have, or should have, with them, if he is to be “right.” To be right he must re-establish the bounds of his discontinuous self and go home.

If religion depends on a belief in or experience of continuity, then Henry James’s secular religion was founded upon the continuity of consciousness alone—his, finally—with itself. In his 1910 essay which asks, “Is There a Life After Death?,” James answers yes there is, for those who like him accumulate so much “of the very treasure itself of consciousness” (221) with its “consecrated ‘interest’” (222) that its “acquired momentum” (215) can propel the “personal” self past death into perpetuity. James reverses his father’s dogma that self-consciousness is an evil, tainted “waste” to be defecated (Habegger 233) in order to ensure its discontinuity from the sacred. To the son, self-consciousness serves as a “luxurious waste” (AD 223) that enables him to imagine feeling eternally “fed and fed” (222), supplying him with an endlessly recyclable continuity.¹⁴ The accumulated linguistic concretions of, as William might have put it, a lifetime of serial discontinuities enable James to say, as if combining Madame Blavatsky with

Samuel Beckett, “I practically know what I am talking about when I say, ‘I,’ hypothetically, for my full experience of another term of being, just as I know it when I say ‘I’ for my experience of this one; but I shouldn’t in the least do so were I not *able* to say ‘I’” (*AD* 212). By means of his own performative metapsychology, James lays claim after all to a form of personal continuity mysteriously contained within the “compact formation” (*GB* 376) of the knowing, speaking “I.” As if using what many Protestants (including Henry Sr.) saw as the scandalous afflatus of Catholicism to re-inflate the flattened interiority of his ancestral Calvinism, Henry James fashioned the simulacrum of a personal religion that resembled Sacvan Bercovitch’s description of “[t]he American Puritan self [as] a garden enclosed from the threat even of secular failure” (101).

NOTES

¹ James found the sensuous aestheticism of Catholicism a welcome antidote to the Puritan asceticism he parodies in so many fictional encounters between the American and the European, terms which can easily be read as loose baggy euphemisms for the Protestant vs. the Catholic. Lambert Strether’s itinerary in *The Ambassadors* is from Protestant asceticism to Catholic aestheticism and, unfortunately for him, back again.

² On the subject of his childhood education, Henry James famously wrote that “it is quite for me as if the authors of our being and guardians of our youth had virtually said to us but one thing, directed our course but by one word, though constantly repeated: Convert, convert, convert!” (*AU* 123).

³ I am attempting to encapsulate in these few pages the argument of my book in progress, *America the “Secular”: The James Family and Others*.

⁴ This general definition can accommodate a variety of religious practices past and current, including “primitive” religion as described by anthropologist Thomas Luckmann, forms of communalism like Communism, and even Zen practices that center on the idea of an all-inclusive void.

⁵ Even popular fiction offered American readers alternative sources of “continuity,” for example, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s wildly popular novel, *The Gates Ajar*, about heaven, where life continues as it did here on earth, only in prettier houses, and with free piano lessons.

⁶ “As organic evolution reached its goal and completion in *man*, so human evolution must reach its goal and completion in the *ideal man*—i.e., the Christ” (Le Conte 360). Also see, for example, Carus. This thoroughly Christian view of the “‘machinery’ of nature as justified by the advance of humanity beyond it, when progress would occur on a spiritual plane” (Secord 66) was not new or atypical. It was current in both academic and popular science writing in England by the early 1830s and remains active in various American New Age belief systems.

⁷ Gilmore discusses racial and other anxieties and exhilarations both material and immaterial inspired by “telegraphy discourse.” Philosophical discourses that are now in some quarters seen as incipiently anti-foundational, such as that of C. S. Peirce concerning the referentiality and correspondence, vs. the pragmatic functionalism, of language, could be seen as concerned with whether or not language is “continuous” with reality. Chauncey Wright, as Louis Menand recently put it, thought “‘continuity’ [. . .] simply a verbal handle we attach to a bundle of empirical observations. It is not something that actually exists in nature” (53).

⁸ See, for example, *Principles of Psychology*, 457ff.

⁹ It does seem to be mothers (or at least women) who teach these life lessons in James; one can speculate that James learned something about this existential strategy from his own low-key, not to say muffled (because maritally immured?), mother, with whom he was clearly affectionately allied.

¹⁰ I’ve written on other occasions about the “labor of detachment” in James, most extensively on *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. I discuss what James calls “the labour of [Maggie Verver’s] detachment” (*GB* 423) in “Consecrated Diplomacy and the Concretion of Self.”

¹¹ According to Fussell, Maggie Verver, a “cradle Catholic” (31), may be James’s “most” (73) Catholic character, as well as “James’ most fully developed and most powerful fictive personage” (135), and the one with whom James most identified himself (127). In creating *The Golden Bowl*, “indisputably Henry James’s Roman Catholic masterpiece” (127), James was exploring, Fussell claims, what it would feel like to be a Roman Catholic woman novelist (136).

¹² The resistant “equilibrium” (*GB* 336, 337, 348, 352, 396, 510) which Maggie seeks to disrupt and re-distribute is the inertia of the reigning balance of continuities and discontinuities in their present arrangement. Maggie desires to make discontinuous those relations which had been

continuous (she with her father, the Prince with Charlotte) and to make continuous those which had been discontinuous (she from her husband, Charlotte from Adam). Concern with “equilibrium” can be found throughout James’s fiction.

¹³I realize that here again I disagree with critics such as Posnock, who attribute to James a pragmatic ethic of exposure, or Levin, who emphasizes in James a will to avoid fixity in favor of “transition.”

¹⁴Or as Banta has phrased it, less bizarrely, James prefers to view “expanded consciousness” as capable of “redefin[ing] fact as intuitive awareness, occult moral vision, and transcending spirit” (63).

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