MODES OF DISLOCATION IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE EUROPEANS*

NICOLETA POPESCU
'Valahia' University of Targoviste

„*One discovers Europe to know America*"
F.O. Matthiessen

Abstract: In the 1870s James began to explore a new area of interest: the Europe–America contrast. In a letter to William Dean Howells, editor of the „Atlantic Monthly", James outlines his plan for "The Europeans", mentioning: "I suspect it is the tragedies in life that arrest my attention more than the other things and say more to my imagination".

Key-words: dislocation, contrast, culture

Henry James was in many respects the inspirer of the modern experimental novel. His theory of the novel is based on the premises laid down in his famous essay "The Art of Fiction", where he asserts that the novel should be concerned with the major values of life: "The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life". The author's interest concentrates not so much upon the external aspects such as the past family relations, the social background, as it does upon the inner side.

The difference between Europeans and New Englanders manifests itself in particular in the expression of feelings and emotions, which are very sensitive for the former: love is more important than money. Moreover, American people are more straitlaced and they have closer links with tradition. The most important thing in life for those living in the "New World" is, ironically, respecting old traditions and accepting the rules of a good morality. It seems that America is not at all a „Brave New World" but altogether the very imitation of the old Europe, a return in the past. In reading the novel, our attention should be focused on the interplay between "home and exile, the familiar and the foreign, the superficial and the secret". There is an overwhelming contrast between the American innocence (or lack of sophistication) and the European sophistication (or decadence).

Henry James was aiming at a "beautiful performance" to put against the "barren abstinence" or lack of "delicacy" of his native culture. "Performance" becomes a key-word in appreciating some of the differences between the "Europeans" and the Puritans. The Europeans, the visiting cousins, are there mainly to provide a foil for the American family, a study of the New England Ethos being the essential purpose of the writer.

Dislocation is not done only in the simple terms of actual traveling and remapping of the world, the veils of concepts such as private space and the larger one of estrangement are thorn in a subtle and aesthetic way. The transmutations that prove to be the most intense are the inner ones.

Spatiality and the dislocation that takes place within it are nevertheless based on the ancient principle of "ex machina" that is not much different here from the ancient stage. The only dissonance that might appear takes the shape of Eros.

There is a real danger that Eugenia will make the reader see the American Puritans as hopelessly rigid, monocular, self-stereotyping and unnuanced (probably with the exception of Gertrude, who sometimes fights against the dominant Puritan ethos), keeping in mind that one of the reasons for her visiting America is to find a good husband. Baroness Munster is helplessly attracted to "this dreadful country" and the rich relatives, hoping that "the *voix du sang*" should go before everything. Nevertheless, she is at the same time experiencing a dire need to break free from the new social relations and is trying to distance from all kind of pleasure on the principle that less is more. The long dreamt land becomes in the end a space of oppression, a prison.

BDD-A20420 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:42 UTC)

Settled down in the Wentworths' house, the Baroness is trying to transform it according to her own traditions and liking, she is making an attempt to reterritorialize herself, in a violent passion that that has been raised by her confinement in a space that also contains pressure:

> What indeed, was the Baroness doing *dans cette gallere*? What fish did she expect to land out of these very stagnant waters? (James. The Europeans 78)
>
> The Baroness had brought with her to the New World a copious provision of the element of costume; and the two Miss Wentworths, when they came over to see her, were somewhat bewildered by the obtrusive distribution of her wardrobe. (James. The Europeans 79)

On the other hand, Gertrude is in the same, though reversed, situation. Her illusory freedom is completely turned upside down by the uncanny place she visits, by the "foreign house", and she becomes in that moment a stranger for her own self. The only way that would reinstate self control is to rediscover her feminine and natural essence. The unfaithfulness that she displays in front of her family is just the thin surface of a much deeper feeling, the middle ground between love and hate, where the erotic dimension is being discovered as an Idea and Ideal at the same time.

Although the stress is put on the young generations, Mr. Wentworth is, in his turn, profoundly surprised and fascinated by Eugenia's marriage experience as well as Robert Acton's. In the American eyes, Eugenia really is a perplexing woman. Her appearance he perceives as almost a threat:

> You must be careful, you must keep watch. Indeed, we must all be careful. This is a great change; we are to be exposed to peculiar influences. I don't say they are bad. I don't judge them in advance. But they may perhaps make it necessary that we should exercise a great deal of wisdom and self-control. It will be a different tone. (James. The Europeans 75)

The limits of estrangement, as they change shift and move all the time, drag along the soul and thus the characters have to face an inner displacement of desires as well, that will remain in a constant correlation with the new world, with the artificial universe that is being imposed as a pseudo-ancient ceremonial background.

James's fundamental project in writing The Europeans is his juxtaposition of two different worlds, two different value systems, two different ways of seeing. Trying to find a way of mediating between these two worlds occupies successive somewhat inglorious positions. In the cultural map that James is making in his writing, he is interested in differentiating the forms that the life of the leisured classes takes inside all the national cultures he touches upon; American ways from English ways, French from Italian (and, for that matter, also, Bostonians from New Yorkers, Paris from the French countryside). The scattering of actual French words in the text as we have it is there to stand for a residue of untranslatable difference; and, at the same time, for the capacity of English to rise to express the difference. French has had a special status as the European language reached for by the educated everywhere to express a certain range of apprehension: subtle, worldly, knowing, communicating cleverly the nuances of social performance. The French words are often an invocation of a social amenity, a sheer practiced expertise in all those innumerable arrangements that keep the privileged classes pleasured with so little sign of sweat.

But at the bottom of this minutely differentiated complexity lies an argument which James is forever taking up and refining upon, and which he never closes, between the Old World and the New. Those very terms, of course, make the co-existence in geographical space of these cultural differences also work on another axis, between past and present, tradition and modernity.

Such crude reductions cry out for complication; and the first complication is that in fact so many of these cultural differences are in fact played out in the novels between Americans and Americans. This must have been the solution James found to the problem of what feels crude and

BDD-A20420 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:42 UTC)

inauthentic in his treatment of the Old World/ New World theme in his novels. He can enact the argument without having to pretend to render both sides with the same inwardness; the Old World can be encountered and its appeal and its potency evoked through the mediation of his crowd of expatriate connoisseurs, who represent no doubt both a reality in the period in question and also a superbly useful novelistic invention. Established in London, James sedulously worked at making himself a purer Anglo-Saxon than he believed he could be anywhere along the periphery of the race, forgetful, it seems, that Anglo-Saxons are explorers and colonizers no less truly than huggers of the insular hearth. The two charming characters from Europe, though with some of America in their blood, are faced with the deadly seriousness which Henry James remembered as prevailing in the suburbs of Boston. There is caricature in his Wentworths, with their large square house and large square consciences; there is perhaps less of it in the European cousins who find here so little use for the virtues of joy or flexibility; but the conflict of manners is nevertheless presented with nearly as much detachment as brilliance. The heroine, the Baroness, does not look back, is no longer tempted to rejoice and indulge herself in the victory, but pledges for a more promising act of the self. There is irony present, mainly due to the fact that the author showed more concern for the process that takes place at the level of consciousness, while the characters are to be found in the ending face to face with their fears and empty passions that find no object. At times the author may seem to forget that a character is something incalculably more than the sum of all its phases; and then his characters tend to have their existence, as positivists expect to have their immortality, simply and solely in the minds of other people. But James himself famously urged that the writer try "to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"

The purely theatrical ending – actually a genuine way of conferring freedom to the actants – takes place in The Europeans, where the existence of the heroine is enriched with the nuance that would immediately catch the uninitiated eye of the public and veil the condition that was reached together with the essence that one believed to be a perfect way of erotic fulfillment. The dislocation is thus the only thing that is fulfilled here, the space refused to bear the actants and, in their turn, the actants refuse to believe the meaning of it. And dislocation does not stop here, the psyche is now in conflict with the consciousness and the Baroness, for instance, is experiencing an inner disunion, that in terms of narrative technique is situated avant modernism proper, and that brings to surface the inanity of her possible continuity on the same scene:

But Eugenia, turning and still holding her candle aloft, only looked about the little sitting-room at her gimcracks and curtains and cushions. "My maid shall pack up," she repeated. "Bonte divine, what rubbish! I feel like a strolling actress; these are my `properties.' "

"Is the play over, Eugenia?" asked Felix.

She gave him a sharp glance. "I have spoken my part."

"With great applause!" said her brother.

"Oh, applause--applause!" she murmured. And she gathered up two or three of her dispersed draperies. She glanced at the beautiful brocade, and then, "I don't see how I can have endured it!" she said."Endure it a little longer. Come to my wedding." "Thank you; that's your affair. My affairs are elsewhere."

The pivot upon which James's Old World/ New World argument turns in his writing is upon the sexual arrangements inside the different cultural spaces. The novel is also structured around its irresolvable argument between the sins of the Old World (old-fashioned-Continental-adulterous) and the sins of the New (puritan-appropriative-infantilizing).

"Old World" and "New" are of course ideas and as such difficult to interrogate as realities external to the writing; but then the argument in James's fiction is also an argument between two

BDD-A20420 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:42 UTC)

novel traditions. The English-language tradition, evolved under the pens of so many women writers and in crucial relationship to its female readership!

As a novelist, Henry James is a modern of the moderns both in subject matter and in method. He is entirely loyal to contemporary life and reverentially exact in his transcription of the phase. His characters are for the most part people of the world who conceive of life as a fine art and have the leisure to carry out their theories. Rarely are they at close quarters with any ugly practical task. They are subtle and complex with the subtlety and the complexity that come from conscious preoccupation with themselves. They are specialists in conduct and past masters in casuistry, and are full of variations and shadows of turning. Moreover, they are finely expressive of milieu; each belongs unmistakably to his class and his race; each is true to inherited moral traditions and delicately illustrative of some social code. To reveal the power and the tragedy of life through so many minutely limiting and apparently artificial conditions, and by means of characters who are somewhat self-conscious and are apt to make of life only a pleasant pastime, might well seem an impossible task. Yet it is precisely in this that Henry James is pre-eminently successful. The essentially human is what he really cares for; however much he may at times seem preoccupied with the technique of his art or with the mask of conventions through which he makes the essentially human reveal itself.

The stress put on youth and regeneration
The idea of the New World is a coherent fiction
Misperceptions, misreading, misinterpretations
Amusing vs. absurd
Feminity
The Promised Land
Paradox of "an object of desire"
Denoting secrets
Language used: a lot of French words (sometimes even Italian)
Contemptus mundae = contempt of the world, of pleasure, distancing from all kind of pleasure on the principle that less is more
All utopias turn into dystopias = **spaces of oppression, but at the same time any utopia is a prison**
America vs. "America" = the idea of Am., the experience of it, imaginary America
The special movement brings about inner change. But people don't change, they just reterritorialize their own place (just repeat home, reproduce it, copy it)
Her exile can happen only in her mind, it's in fact a state of mind
Traveling = a state of amnesia, trying to forget smth.
= **changes the character**
= **the erotic fascination of the other land**
A foreign country is like love; love is like a foreign country
Mimetic type of action

The Europeans (1878) subjects

Again, England is the exception; James can "do" England from inside as confidently as he can "do" America. "Old World" and "New" are of course ideas and as such difficult to interrogate as realities external to the writing; but then the argument in James's fiction is also an argument between two novel traditions. The English-language tradition, evolved under the pens of so many women writers and in crucial relationship to its female readership, eschewed an improper sexuality and took form primarily inside what Ruth Bernard Yeazell has called the "space of courtship between love and marriage". James's skeptical transitional fictions of the eighteen-nineties are interrogations of the traditional values of the English-language novel: an idealizing chaste femininity; a problematical and sometimes even pathological propriety. These fictions are about the

BDD-A20420 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:42 UTC)

processes inside a given culture for unlearning sexual superstitions, and about how those superstitions, once uprooted, shake the very foundations of a way of living and imagining.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. ANDERSON, Charles R., *Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 1977.
2. BELLRINGER, Alan, *Henry James*, London: MacMillan, 1988.
3. BLACKMUR, Richard P., ed., *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, New York and London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1962.
4. JAMES Henry, *The Europeans*, New York: Penguin Books, 1984.
5. JAMES, Henry, "The Art of Fiction", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, vol.* 2, Nina Baym et al., eds., New York and London: Norton, p. 330-347 (1985).
6. LUSTIG T. J., "Sunspots and Blindspots in The Europeans", in *The Reception of Henry James in Text and Images*, E-Rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, no. 3, 2005.

BDD-A20420 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:42 UTC)