THE INTERNATIONAL THEME IN REVERSE: HENRY JAMES'S 'THE EUROPEANS'

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***Abstract**: The paper analyses Henry James's novel "The Europeans", focusing especially on the perceptions that the two European siblings and their American relatives have on one another on the occasion of the former visiting the latter.*
***Keywords**: perception, difference, change*

An American-born writer, who chose to spend his life in England, Henry James presented in his critical book *Hawthorne* published in 1879 "a long list 'of items of high civilization' that America lacked, from aristocracy, an established church and a royal court, to an evident class structure and a code of manners." (apud Pop-Corniş 1981: 67). Since he considered that a novelist lived on matured and established things like manners, customs, usage, habits that were to be found more in Europe than in America, he turned his eyes to the Old World, appreciating not only its writers (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, Gustave Flaubert or Ivan Turgenev), but also its traditions, art, history, in other words its more complex culture.

Henry James chose to build most of his novels on the contrast between American provincialism and innocence and European sophistication and experience. He explored "a frontier world of contrasted manners and morals" (Pop-Corniş 1981: 72), this "international theme" leading eventually to existential and moral aspects, because it mainly involved the initiation of the "American innocent" in a more complex form of social and moral life. So the pattern of this theme starts with a generous, candid and enterprising American, who lives in an environment where s/he feels that s/he cannot develop. In order to transcend this condition, the only choice is to start a journey of initiation that takes him/ her to Europe (France, England and/ or Italy). In Europe, s/he will face not only culture, art, manners, but also evil, as s/he will find European subtleties of manners and morality strange and difficult to understand and obey. This very complex experience leads the character to a moment of choice between three possibilities:

1. s/he may give up Europe and return to America as dull as s/he was at the beginning, after only a superficial contact with the Old World;
2. s/he may go deeper in the matter and accept partial assimilation, which is quite dangerous because it leaves the character half-European, half-American, i.e. neither European, nor American, and s/he cannot find his place on either continent because s/he does not fully belong to either;
3. s/he accepts a complete assimilation, a complete initiation, after which s/he becomes both European and American, at large on both continents, belonging equally to both. This is the case of Henry James himself.

In *The Europeans*, however, we are not presented any travel from America to Europe. As a matter of fact, Marcel Pop-Corniş does not even consider the novel as dealing with the international theme. He states that "James's series of international novels was interrupted by a number of novels that deal almost exclusively with American realities (or with America as seen by Europeans)", including here the book

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under discussion. (1981: 77) It is precisely the fact that James deals in *The Europeans* with America as seen by some inhabitants of the Old Continent that led me to entitle my paper "The International Theme in Reverse". Actually, the novel no longer presents the American innocent taking a journey of initiation to our continent, but two rather experienced Europeans taking a trip to America. The contrast between the two European siblings and their Bostonian relatives, the expectations and perceptions they have of each other, the way in which opposites attract (or not) form the substance of the book and render it particularly interesting to read, though it is not considered among James's masterpieces, being one of his first novels (it was published in 1878).

At the beginning of the novel, we find Eugenia, Baroness Münster, and her brother, Felix Young, at the best hotel in Boston. Eugenia is no longer in her first youth, being 33 years old. She is not pretty, either, but behaves as if she were, and has a special way of making herself pleasant and admired if this is what she desires. Her younger brother (28 years old), though apparently frivolous and incapable of taking anything seriously, is actually an optimistic and vivacious man, kind-hearted and inspiring confidence. She got her title after having married a German prince. Adolf of Silberstadt-Schreckenstein is the younger brother of the reigning prince. The latter would like the marriage dissolved because he has other marital plans for Eugenia's present husband. Felix is an artist, engaged to send sketches to a newspaper. Both the baroness and the artist are rather poor, and the sister is more disturbed by it than the brother.

They have a rather complex heritage and are actually citizens of the entire Europe. Their mother was American; in a European tour she met and married (after turning Roman Catholic) Adolphus Young. Adolphus was born in Sicily, but also had American parents. Eugenia was born in Vienna, Felix somewhere in France. Still, he does not consider himself French. Actually, he cannot state his nationality precisely; all he can say about himself is just that he is "a foreigner of some sort" (James 1995: 28). Later on, Felix will tell one of his cousins that he is a European, and his sister is even more European than himself. They lived in practically every city in the Old Continent. As it is to be expected, though they speak excellent English, they use frequently French words or even sentences (especially to express their emotions). Their Bostonian uncle is their mother's much younger half-brother. They never saw each other because the Americans chose to ignore their mother (and her European family) after her undesirable marriage.

Now, the siblings came to American to make their fortunes: to get married to a rich person or just to find inspiration (and/ or models) for the money-bringing sketches. They hope their relatives, about whom they do not know much, are rich. They find in America a strange world: from the women's clothes to the means of transportation, from the climate to the state of the roads, from the interior decorations to the people's behaviour.

From the very beginning, Eugenia hates everything. She thinks they made a mistake coming to America, which she considers a "dreadful country" (James 1995: 9) Actually, what she sees on her hotel window can hardly encourage her. Though it is the 12th of May, the weather does not show signs of spring, let alone summer. It is drizzling, and the window-panes are battered by the sleet. The Bostonians are "trampling in the liquid snow", and crowd, from time to time, to get in a vehicle of a type that she has never seen until now: "a huge, low omnibus, painted in brilliant colours, and decorated apparently with jingling bells, attached to a species of groove in the pavement, through which it was dragged, with a great deal of rumbling, bouncing, and scratching, by a couple of remarkably small horses". (James 1995: 6) As if to add to Eugenia's irritation,

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the room has a view not only to the street, but also to the narrow graveyard across it. No wonder that she would like to return to Europe as soon as possible, that is the next day. Her brother tries to make her change her mind. He, on the contrary, is delighted to be in America, which he considers "a most curious and interesting country". (James 1995: 11) He is of the opinion that, since they are here, he might as well enjoy it. He is amused of what he sees on the window and quickly draws a sketch of the people rushing into the omnibus.

But the weather changes dramatically, and, as soon as the sun starts shining, the two siblings go out to see the world. "They walked about the streets at hazard, looking at the people and the houses, the shops and the vehicles, the blazing blue sky and the muddy crossings, the hurrying men and the slow-strolling maidens, the fresh red bricks and the bright green trees, the extraordinary mixture of smartness and shabbiness." (James 1995: 13) It is a country full of contrasts, which Felix considers comical, therefore he laughs at everything around him. His sister is again more reserved. "It seemed to her now that she was at en enormous fair – that the entertainment and the *désagréments* were very much the same. She found herself alternately smiling and shrinking; the show was very curious, but it was probable from moment to moment that one would be jostled. The Baroness had never seen so many people walking about before; she had never been so mixed up with people she did not know. But little by little she felt that this fair was a more serious undertaking." (James 1995: 15) She is surprised at the bold outfits of the women and at the absence of the carriages. In Europe, "it was the hour at which ladies should come out for an airing and roll past a hedge of pedestrians, holding their parasols askance." But "here, however, Eugenia observed no indications of this custom, the absence of which was more anomalous as there was a charming avenue of remarkably graceful arching elms in the most convenient contiguity to a large, cheerful street, in which, evidently, among the more prosperous members of the *bourgeoisie*, a great deal of pedestrianism went forward." (ibid.)

The changing of the weather encourages Eugenia to postpone her departure. Therefore, they decide that Felix should pay a visit to their uncle and announce their arrival. The first person in the family that he meets is their cousin Gertrude; she is somewhat different from the other two, Charlotte and Clifford, being rather independent, sensitive and imaginative, not so keen on respecting conventions and willing to live her life as she wants, not as the others try to impose on her. She is delighted to see that she has such a charming cousin. The feelings are mutual. She and Felix fall in love with each other at first sight. She is also impressed to hear that Felix's sister is a baroness, and is also impressed by the sad story of Eugenia's marriage. Felix is overwhelmed by their hospitality, delighted with their house, which somebody called "a venerable mansion", though to Felix is looks "as if it had been built last night." It is normal, since Felix is used to the European dimension of time. Europe has a longer history than America, and what seems old to an inhabitant of the New World does not necessarily seem so to somebody who is more used to the ancient buildings of Italy and France. The style of the inhabitants of this house seems to Felix primitive and patriarchal, "the *ton* of the golden age". In short, "wealth without symptoms. A plain, homely way of life; nothing for show, and very little (…) for the senses; but a great *aisance*, and a lot of money, out of sight." "No, they are not gay (…). They are sober; they are even severe. They are of a pensive cast; they take things hard. I think there is something the matter with them; they have some melancholy memory or some depressing expectation. It's not the epicurean temperament. My uncle, Mr. Wentworth, is a tremendously high-toned old fellow; he looks as if he were undergoing martyrdom,

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not by fire, but by freezing. But we shall cheer them up; we shall do them good. They will take a good deal of stirring up; but they are wonderfully kind and gentle. And they are appreciative. They think one clever; they think one remarkable!" (James 1995: 33-34) It is the way Felix perceives them (and describes them to his sister) after the first visit, during which he also met three other persons who are very close to the Wentworths: Mr. Brand, whom they would like to see married to Gertrude, Mr. Robert Acton, and his sister Lizzie, who, they assume, will marry Clifford. The Baroness is not so utterly delighted by what she hears, but decides to go and see for herself what they are all like.

It is from now on that the differences between the Europeans and the Americans become more evident. Felix's perception of them is rather accurate. But his anticipation of their cheering their cousins up is not. With the exception of Gertrude, the Wentworths do not really want to be cheered up. The arrival of the two siblings is not viewed in the household as a source of entertainment, but rather as a reason for exercising responsibility. It is a disruption that the quiet and conservative members of the family do not need, but rather fear. However, they do not think even for one moment of turning them out. A family council is held to decide where the two shall live. First, they consider allowing their relatives to live in their house, but Gertrude suggests that they might need more privacy, therefore Robert Acton thinks they may stay in "the other house", across the street. Charlotte disagrees and Mr. Wentworth is afraid of the change. "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 1995: 49) Gertrude, on the other hand, is delighted that she will be able to see how other people live, and she is curious about it. For her, it is as if Europe had moved across the street. "I want to see how they will live. I am sure they will have different hours. She will do all kinds of little things differently. When we go over there it will be like going to Europe. She will have a boudoir. She will invite us to dinner – very late. She will breakfast in her room." (James 1995: 50) It is precisely the fear that Gertrude might be badly influenced by their cousins' presence in their own house that actually makes Charlotte and Mr. Wentworth agree to keep them in the other one. On the other hand, Eugenia could not have stood for more than three days at the Wentworths', unlike her brother, who could have spent his entire life there. Eugenia likes her relatives, but considers that living with them would be the same as living in a convent. The truth is that she does not seem to be genuinely interested in sharing her time with their cousins' circle. In essence, she simply wants to be alone, neglecting all the society around her. In contrast, her brother is very happy to share his spare time with Charlotte and Gertrude.

The house where they are supposed to live seems bare both to Eugenia and to her French maid; therefore, the latter decorates it with all sorts of wax candles, draperies, shawls and other such objects placed practically everywhere. Gertrude, of course, is delighted with the result, but Charlotte is almost on the point of offering to help her cousin put all things back in order.

Eugenia becomes the central figure of the little Wentworth circle, but she is very different from her two cousins. She is independent and modern, while they lack self-possession, tending to comply with their father's suggestions. The two sisters also differ in their opinion on her: Charlotte watches her with reserve, Gertrude admires her and constantly watches her as if to learn from the best how to behave in certain situations. When they have guests and she perceives her cousin to be as bored with their presence

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as herself, Gertrude becomes "absorbed in study of the problem how, in spite of her indifference and her absent attention, she managed to have such a charming manner. That was the manner Gertrude would like to have; she determined to cultivate it, and she wished that – to give her the charm – she might in future very often be bored". (James 1995: 156) The naivete of her considerations, however, shows us how far she still is from her model. Her sister Charlotte is even more naïve than her when she assumes that Eugenia means everything she says; as far as this is concerned, Gertrude is aware that sometimes their cousin means the exact opposite. Despite these "minor" differences, both Charlotte and Gertrude are frequently at a loss as regards how to treat their cousin. They are shy in her presence, and do not seem to know what to do, therefore neither becomes Eugenia's friend.

Their father is also at a loss in Eugenia's presence. Mr. Wentworth visits his niece every afternoon. Then, she comes at their place for tea, which she finds "an anomalous and picturesque repast", for which she dresses "as if for dinner" (James 1995: 61). In spite of this very frequent intercourse, Mr. Wentworth cannot get used to his niece. He had never thought of his two young relatives until the moment when they appeared in his doorstep. Now, he perceives them as very different from his own children, as a result of the different influences exerted upon them. He does not consider these influences evil, but he is not happy with them either. "He was sometimes afraid that he should not be able to like his distinguished, delicate, lady-like niece. He was paralyzed and bewildered by her foreignness. She spoke, somehow, a different language. There was something strange in her words." (James 1995: 62). He thinks that another man would appreciate her, but he himself cannot. He cannot even judge her or her marriage. He seems able to get closer to his nephew. Felix is for his uncle too joyous not to be liked. But, at the same time, Mr. Wentworth considers him almost too positive not to be impudent, though "he had more weight and volume and resonance than a number of young men who were distinctly serious." (James 1995: 63) Felix, on the other hand, admires his uncle unrestrictedly. "He thought him a most delicate, generous, high-toned old gentleman, with a very handsome head, of the ascetic type, which he promised himself the profit of sketching." (ibid.) And indeed he will paint his uncle's portrait, though Mr. Wentworth considers that sitting for one' portrait is a form of idleness.

The one member of the circle who does become Eugenia's friend is Robert Acton. He pays frequent visits to Eugenia's place, being fascinated with her. They have long conversations together. Of course, he would like to be more than just a friend. He is in love with her, and he would like her to agree to the dissolving of her marriage and then marry him, but she does neither, as she does not love him.

She seems to like more the other young man in the circle, Clifford Wentworth. Clifford was suspended from college because he drinks, and Felix suggests to his uncle that in order to give up this bad habit he should become interested in a clever, charming woman, i.e. his sister. At first, Eugenia is not particularly happy with the arrangement, but she agrees to talk to him. She becomes like a sort of mentor for the inexperienced, rather bad-mannered and immature young boy. She advises him to go to Europe to go into society, meet people and form relations. She considers this travel as something that he cannot dispense himself from. It would be a travel of initiation, necessary for him to improve his manners. She invites him to visit her in Europe. Clifford is somehow confused with everything he hears, but decides to listen to her. At one point, there is an ambiguous scene, when Robert meets Clifford at Eugenia's place and hears from the two persons involved different versions about the circumstances of the young man's

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visit. This does not make him change his mind about wanting to marry Eugenia, though he no longer considers her an honest woman. But Eugenia refuses him and decides to return to Europe. On the other hand, as a result of his conversations with Baroness Munster, Clifford decides to marry Lizzie Acton, though he had told the baroness that they are not engaged. Eugenia seems surprised to hear that and is quite affected, which could show that she had developed an interest in the young man.

Felix and Gertrude's romance is not shadowed by any suspicions. Their only fear is that Mr. Wentworth will not agree to their getting married. But they receive unexpected help from Mr. Brand, to whom they had previously told that Charlotte is more in love with him than her sister. Therefore, he even offers to perform the marriage ceremony for them.

In a discussion with Felix, Gertrude tells him that the members of her family are dreary and rather repenting, though they have nothing to repent of. She realizes that she is different and that this fact displeases them. Felix, on the other hand, confesses having a high opinion of the Wentworths, though he admits that they are made unhappy too easily. Moreover, he thinks that though they have a position from which they could enjoy life, they do not. Actually, paradoxically enough, these representatives of the New World are more concerned with traditions and morality than the representatives of the Old one. The Wentworths are more puritanical and conventional. For them, Gertrude tells Felix, life is discipline. For Felix, life is an opportunity. This opportunity will be gladly embraced by Gertrude, woken up from her sleep by the young "European". Their relationship helps her to get in touch with the world and to become independent. Now she can react against her father's decision regarding Mr. Brand. Felix and Gertrude get married and go to Europe to enjoy life. The central word of the novel is "clever". It corresponds to the most important quality that, from Eugenia's point of view, we should possess to be happy and satisfied. Maybe that is why, in the end of the novel, Felix tells that Gertrude is different from his sister, but in her own way she is almost as clever: not just intelligent but also by now more experienced and eager to learn and develop.

The critics' opinions on the novel differ. While some chose to ignore it entirely, devoting their attention to more remarkable Jamesian works like *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Ambassadors*, F. R. Leavis considered *The Europeans* a masterpiece. He appreciated James's kind irony and the fact that he was condemning neither America nor Europe. In contrast, William James, the author's brother, condemned the novel's slightness. Henry James agreed somewhat to the criticism, but thought that William took everything too rigidly and unimaginatively, forgetting that this was just a piece of literature. However, he did not include the book in the New York Edition of his fiction that he assembled in 1907-1909. As for myself, even though I cannot consider the book a masterpiece, I have to say that it is exactly its lightness of touch that gives *The Europeans* its charm and makes it worth reading.

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