

ГЕНРИ ДЖЕЙМС

WITHIN THE RIM, AND
OTHER ESSAYS, 1914-15

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Henry James

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WITHIN THE RIM

THE first sense of it all to me after the first shock and horror was that of a sudden leap back into life of the violence with which the American Civil War broke upon us, at the North, fifty-four years ago, when I had a consciousness of youth which perhaps equalled in vivacity my present consciousness of age. The illusion was complete, in its immediate rush; everything quite exactly matched in the two cases; the tension of the hours after the flag of the Union had been fired upon in South Carolina living again, with a tragic strangeness of recurrence, in the interval during which the fate of Belgium hung in the scales and the possibilities of that of France looked this country harder in the face, one recognised, than any possibility, even that of the England of the Armada, even that of the long Napoleonic menace, could be imagined to have looked her. The analogy quickened and deepened with every elapsing hour; the drop of the balance under the invasion of Belgium reproduced with intensity the agitation of the New England air by Mr Lincoln's call to arms, and I went about for a short space as with the queer secret locked in my breast of at least already knowing how such occasions helped and what a big war was going to mean. That this was literally a light in the darkness, or that it materially helped the prospect to be considered, is perhaps more than I can say; but it at least added the strangest of savours, an inexpressible romantic thrill, to the harsh taste of the crisis: I found myself literally knowing 'by experience' what immensities, what monstrosities, what revelations of what immeasurabilities, our affair would carry in its bosom—a knowledge that flattered me by its hint of immunity from illusion. The sudden new tang in the atmosphere, the flagrant difference, as one noted, in the look of everything, especially in that of people's faces, the expressions, the hushes, the clustered groups, the detached wanderers and slow-paced public meditators, were so many impressions long before received and in which the stretch of more than half a century had still left a sharpness. So I took the case in and drew a vague comfort, I can scarce say why, from recognition; so, while recognition lasted, I found it come home to me that we, we of the ancient day, had known, had tremendously learnt, what the awful business is when it is 'long,' when it remains for months and months bitter and arid, void even of any great honour. In consequence of which, under the rapid rise of presumptions of difficulty, to whatever effect of dismay or of excitement, my possession of something like a standard of difficulty, and, as I might perhaps feel too, of success, became in its way a private luxury.

My point is, however, that upon this luxury I was allowed after all but ever so scantily to feed. I am unable to say when exactly it was that the rich analogy, the fine and sharp identity between the faded and the vivid case broke down, with the support obscurely derived from them; the moment anyhow came soon enough at which experience felt the ground give way and that one swung off into space, into history, into darkness, with every lamp extinguished and every abyss gaping. It ceased quite to matter for reassurance that the victory of the North had been so delayed and yet so complete, that our struggle had worn upon the world of the time, and quite to exasperation, as could well be remembered, by its length; if the present complication should but begin to be as long as it was broad no term of comparison borrowed from the past would so much as begin to fit it. I might have found it humiliating; in fact, however, I found it of the most commanding interest, whether at certain hours of dire apprehension or at certain others of the finer probability, that the biggest like convulsion our generations had known was still but too clearly to be left far behind for exaltations and terrors, for effort and result, as a general exhibition of the perversity of nations and of the energy of man. Such at least was the turn the comparison took at a given moment in a remembering mind that

had been steeped, so far as its restricted contact went, but in the Northern story; I did, I confess, cling awhile to the fancy that what loomed perhaps for England, what already did so much more than loom for crucified Belgium, what was let loose in a torrent upon indestructible France, might correspond more or less with the pressure of the old terrible time as the fighting South had had to know it, and with the grim conditions under which she had at last given way. For the rest of the matter, as I say, the difference of aspect produced by the difference of intensity cut short very soon my vision of similitude. The intensity swallowed up everything; the rate and the scale and the speed, the unprecedented engines, the vast incalculable connections, the immediate presence, as it were, of France and Belgium, whom one could hear pant, through the summer air, in their effort and their alarm, these things, with the prodigious might of the enemy added, made me say, dropping into humility in a manner that resembled not a little a drop into still greater depths, 'Oh, no, that surely can't have been "a patch" on this!' Which conclusion made accordingly for a new experience altogether, such as I gratefully embrace here an occasion not to leave unrecorded.

It was in the first place, after the strangest fashion, a sense of the extraordinary way in which the most benign conditions of light and air, of sky and sea, the most beautiful English summer conceivable, mixed themselves with all the violence of action and passion, the other so hideous and piteous, so heroic and tragic facts, and flouted them as with the example of something far superior. Never were desperate doings so blandly lighted up as by the two unforgettable months that I was to spend so much of in looking over from the old rampart of a little high-perched Sussex town at the bright blue streak of the Channel, within a mile or two of us at its nearest point, the point to which it had receded after washing our rock-base in its earlier ages, and staring at the bright mystery beyond the rim of the farthest opaline reach. Just on the other side of that finest of horizon-lines history was raging at a pitch new under the sun; thinly masked by that shameless smile the Belgian horror grew; the curve of the globe toward these things was of the scantest, and yet the hither spaces of the purest, the interval representing only charm and calm and ease. One grew to feel that the nearer elements, those of land and water and sky at their loveliest, were making thus, day after day, a particular prodigious point, insisting in their manner on a sense and a wondrous story which it would be the restless watcher's fault if he didn't take in. Not that these were hints or arts against which he was in the least degree proof; they penetrated with every hour deeper into the soul, and, the contemplations I speak of aiding, irresistibly worked out an endless volume of references. It was all somehow the history of the hour addressing itself to the individual mind—or to that in any case of the person, at once so appalled and so beguiled, of whose response to the whole appeal I attempt this brief account. Round about him stretched the scene of his fondest frequentation as time had determined the habit; but it was as if every reason and every sentiment conducing to the connection had, under the shock of events, entered into solution with every other, so that the only thinkable approach to rest, that is to the recovery of an inward order, would be in restoring them each, or to as many as would serve the purpose, some individual dignity and some form.

It came indeed largely of itself, my main help to the reparatory, the re-identifying process; came by this very chance that in the splendour of the season there was no mistaking the case or the plea. 'This, as you can see better than ever before,' the elements kept conspiring to say, 'is the rare, the sole, the exquisite England whose weight now hangs in the balance, and your appreciation of whose value, much as in the easy years you may have taken it for granted, seems exposed to some fresh and strange and strong determinant, something that breaks in like a character of high colour in a play.' Nothing could have thrilled me more, I recognise, than the threat of this irruption or than the dramatic pitch; yet a degree of pain attached to the ploughed-up state it implied—so that, with an elderly dread of a waste of emotion, I fear I almost pusillanimously asked myself why a sentiment from so far back recorded as lively should need to become any livelier, and in fact should hesitate to beg off from the higher diapason. I felt as the quiet dweller in a tenement so often feels when the question of 'structural improvements' is thrust upon him; my house of the spirit, amid everything

about me, had become more and more the inhabited, adjusted, familiar home, quite big enough and sound enough for the spirit's uses and with any intrinsic inconvenience corrected only since by that principle's having cultivated and formed, at whatever personal cost (since my spirit was essentially a person), the right habits, and so settled into the right attitude for practical, for contented occupation. If, however, such was my vulgar apprehension, as I put it, the case was taken out of my hands by the fate that so often deals with these accidents, and I found myself before long building on additions and upper storys, throwing out extensions and protrusions, indulging even, all recklessly, in gables and pinnacles and battlements—things that had presently transformed the unpretending place into I scarce know what to call it, a fortress of the faith, a palace of the soul, an extravagant, bristling, flag-flying structure which had quite as much to do with the air as with the earth. And all this, when one came to return upon it in a considering or curious way, because to and fro one kept going on the old rampart, the town 'look-out,' to spend one's aching wonder again and again on the bright sky-line that at once held and mocked it. Just over that line were unutterable things, massacre and ravage and anguish, all but irresistible assault and cruelty, bewilderment and heroism all but overwhelmed; from the sense of which one had but to turn one's head to take in something unspeakably different and that yet produced, as by some extraordinary paradox, a pang almost as sharp.

It was of course by the imagination that this latter was quickened to an intensity thus akin to pain—but the imagination had doubtless at every turn, without exception, more to say to one's state of mind, and dealt more with the whole unfolding scene, than any other contributive force. Never in all my life, probably, had I been so glad to have opened betimes an account with this faculty and to be able to feel for the most part something to my credit there; so vivid I mean had to be one's prevision of the rate at which drafts on that source would require cashing. All of which is a manner of saying that in face of what during those horrible days seemed exactly over the way the old inviolate England, as to whom the fact that she *was* inviolate, in every valid sense of the term, had become, with long acquaintance, so common and dull, suddenly shone in a light never caught before and which was for the next weeks, all the magnificence of August and September, to reduce a thousand things to a sort of merciless distinctness. It was not so much that they leaped forth, these things, under the particular recognition, as that they multiplied without end and abounded, always in some association at least that caught the eye, all together overscoring the image as a whole or causing the old accepted synthesis to bristle with accents. The image as a whole, thus richly made up of them—or of the numberless testifying touches to the effect that we were not there on our sea defence as the other, the harried, countries were behind such bulwarks as they could throw up—was the central fact of consciousness and the one to which every impression and every apprehension more or less promptly related themselves; it made of itself the company in which for the time the mind most naturally and yet most importunately lived. One walked of course in the shade of the ambiguous contrast—ambiguous because of the dark question of whether it was the liabilities of Belgium and France, to say nothing of their awful actualities, that made England's state so rare, or England's state that showed her tragic sisters for doubly outraged; the action of the matter was at least that of one's feeling in one's hand and weighing it there with the last tenderness, for fullest value, the golden key that unlocked every compartment of the English character.

Clearly this general mystery or mixture was to be laid open under stress of fortune as never yet—the unprecedentedness was above all what came over us again and again, armaments unknown to human experience looming all the while larger and larger; but whatever face or succession of faces the genius of the race should most turn up the main mark of them all would be in the difference that, taken together, couldn't fail to keep them more unlike the peoples off there beyond than any pair even of the most approved of these peoples are unlike each other. 'Insularity!'—one had spent no small part of one's past time in mocking or in otherwise fingering the sense out of that word; yet here it was in the air wherever one looked and as stuffed with meaning as if nothing had ever worn away from it, as if its full force on the contrary amounted to inward congestion. What the term essentially

signified was in the oddest way a question at once enormous and irrelevant; what it might *show* as signifying, what it was in the circumstances actively and most probably going to, seemed rather the true consideration, indicated with all the weight of the evidence scattered about. Just the fixed *look* of England under the August sky, what was this but the most vivid exhibition of character conceivable and the face turned up, to repeat my expression, with a frankness that really left no further inquiry to be made? That appearance was of the exempt state, the record of the long safe centuries, in its happiest form, and even if any shade of happiness at such an hour might well seem a sign of profanity or perversity. To *that* there were all sorts of things to say, I could at once reflect, however; wouldn't it be the thing supremely in character that England should look most complacently herself, irradiating all her reasons for it, at the very crisis of the question of the true toughness, in other words the further duration, of her identity? I might observe, as for that matter I repeatedly and unspeakably did while the two months lasted, that she was pouring forth this identity, as atmosphere and aspect and picture, in the very measure and to the very top of her consciousness of how it hung in the balance. Thus one arrived, through the succession of shining days, at the finest sense of the case—the interesting truth that her consciously not being as her tragic sisters were in the great particular was virtually just her genius, and that the very straightest thing she could do would naturally be not to flinch at the dark hour from any profession of her genius. Looking myself more askance at the dark hour (politically speaking I mean) than I after my fashion figured her as doing in her mass, I found it of an extreme, of quite an endless fascination to trace as many as possible of her felt idiosyncrasies back to her settled sea-confidence, and to see this now in turn account for so many other things, the smallest as well as the biggest, that, to give the fewest hints of illustration, the mere spread of the great trees, the mere gathers in the little bluey-white curtains of the cottage windows, the mere curl of the tinted smoke from the old chimneys matching that note, became a sort of exquisite evidence.

Exquisite evidence of a like general class, it was true, didn't on the other side of the Channel prevent the awful liability to the reach of attack—its having borne fruit and been corrected or averted again was in fact what half the foreign picture meant; but the foreign genius was the other, other at almost every point; it had always in the past and on the spot, one remembered, expressed things, confessed things, with a difference, and part of that difference was of course the difference of history: the fact of exemption, as I have called it, the fact that a blest inviolacy was almost exactly what had least flourished. France and Belgium, to refer only to them, became dear accordingly, in the light I speak of, because, having suffered and suffered, they were suffering yet again, while precisely the opposite process worked for the scene directly beneath my eyes. England was interesting, to put it mildly—which is but a shy evasion of putting it passionately—because she hadn't suffered, because there were passages of that sort she had publicly declined and defied; at the same time that one wouldn't have the case so simple as to set it down wholly to her luck. France and Belgium, for the past, confessed, to repeat my term; while England, so consistently harmonised, with all her long unbrokenness thick and rich upon her, seemed never to do that, nor to need it, in order to practise on a certain fine critical, not to mention a certain fine prejudiced, sensibility. It was the season of sensibility now, at any rate for just those days and just that poor place of yearning, of merely yearning, vigil; and I may add with all emphasis that never had I had occasion so to learn how far sensibility may go when once well wound up. It was saying little to say I did justice easiest at once and promptest to the most advertised proposal of the enemy, his rank intention of clapping down the spiked helmet, than which no form of headgear, by the way, had ever struck one as of a more graceless, a more tell-tale platitude, upon the priceless genius of France; far from new, after all, was that measure of the final death in him of the saving sense of proportion which only gross dementia can abolish. Those of my generation who could remember the detected and frustrated purpose of a renewed Germanic pounce upon the country which, all but bled to death in 1871, had become capable within five years of the most penetrating irony of revival ever recorded, were well aware of how in that at once sinister and grotesque connection they had felt notified in time. It was the extension of the programme and

its still more prodigious publication during the quarter of a century of interval, it was the announced application of the extinguisher to the quite other, the really so contrasted genius the expression of which surrounded me in the manner I have glanced at, it was the extraordinary fact of a declared non-sufferance any longer, on Germany's part, of either of the obnoxious national forms disfiguring her westward horizon, and even though by her own allowance they had nothing intellectually or socially in common save that they were objectionable and, as an incident, crushable—it was this, I say, that gave one furiously to think, or rather, while one thanked one's stars for the luxury, furiously and all but unutterably to feel.

The beauty and the interest, the now more than ever copious and welcome expression, of the aspects nearest me found their value in their being so resistingly, just to that very degree of eccentricity, with that very density of home-grownness, what they were; in the same way as the character of the sister-land lately joined in sisterhood showed for exquisite because so ingrained and incorrigible, so beautifully all her own and inimitable on other ground. If it would have been hard really to give the measure of one's dismay at the awful proposition of a world squeezed together in the huge Prussian fist and with the variety and spontaneity of its parts oozing in a steady trickle, like the sacred blood of sacrifice, between those hideous knuckly fingers, so, none the less, every reason with which our preference for a better condition and a nobler fate could possibly bristle kept battering at my heart, kept, in fact, pushing into it, after the fashion of a crowd of the alarmed faithful at the door of a church. The effect was literally, yes, as of the occasion of some great religious service, with prostrations and exaltations, the light of a thousand candles and the sound of soaring choirs—all of which figured one's individual inward state as determined by the menace. One could still note at the same time, however, that this high pitch of private emotion was by itself far from meeting the case as the enemy presented it; what I wanted, of course, to do was to meet it with the last lucidity, the fullest support for particular defensive pleas or claims—and this even if what most underlay all such without exception came back to my actual vision, that and no more, of the general sense of the land. The vision was fed, and fed to such a tune that in the quest for reasons—that is, for the particulars of one's affection, the more detailed the better—the blades of grass, the outlines of leaves, the drift of clouds, the streaks of mortar between old bricks, not to speak of the call of child-voices muffled in the comforting air, became, as I have noted, with a hundred other like touches, casually felt, extraordinary admonitions and symbols, close links of a tangible chain. When once the question fairly hung there of the possibility, more showily set forth than it had up to then presumed to be, of a world without use for the tradition so embodied, an order substituting for this, by an unmannerly thrust, quite another and really, it would seem, quite a ridiculous, a crudely and clumsily improvised story, we might all have resembled together a group of children at their nurse's knee disconcerted by some tale that it isn't their habit to hear. We loved the old tale, or at least I did, exactly because I knew it; which leaves me keen to make the point, none the less, that my appreciation of the case for world-variety found the deeply and blessedly familiar perfectly consistent with it. This came of what I 'read into' the familiar; and of what I did so read, of what I kept reading through that uplifted time, these remarks were to have attempted a record that has reached its limit sooner than I had hoped.

I was not then to the manner born, but my apprehension of what it was on the part of others to be so had been confirmed and enriched by the long years, and I gave myself up to the general, the native image I thus circled around as to the dearest and most precious of all native images. That verily became at the crisis an occupation sublime; which was not, after all, so much an earnest study or fond arrangement of the mixed aspects as a positive, a fairly sensual bask in their light, too kindled and too rich not to pour out by its own force. The strength and the copious play of the appearances acting in this collective fashion carried everything before them; no dark discrimination, no stiff little reserve that one might ever have made, stood up in the diffused day for a moment. It was in the opposite way, the most opposite possible, that one's intelligence worked, all along the line; so that with the warmth of the mere sensation that 'they' were about as good, above all when it came to the stress, as

could well be expected of people, there was the acute interest of the successive points at which one recognised why. This last, the satisfaction of the deepened intelligence, turned, I may frankly say, to a prolonged revel—'they' being the people about me and every comfort I had ever had of them smiling its individual smile straight at me and conducing to an effect of candour that is beyond any close notation. They didn't know how good they were, and their candour had a peculiar lovability of unconsciousness; one had more imagination at their service in this cause than they had in almost any cause of their own; it was wonderful, it was beautiful, it was inscrutable, that they could make one feel this and yet not feel with it that it at all practically diminished them. Of course, if a shade should come on occasion to fall across the picture, that shade would perhaps be the question whether the most restless of the faculties mightn't on the whole too much fail them. It beautified life, I duly remembered, it promoted art, it inspired faith, it crowned conversation, but hadn't it—always again under stress—still finer applications than these, and mightn't it in a word, taking the right direction, peculiarly conduce to virtue? Wouldn't it, indeed, be indispensable to virtue of the highest strain? Never mind, at any rate—so my emotion replied; with it or without it we seemed to *be*

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