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Henry James
An Alien's "History" of America

Martha Banta



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Grazie Mille

*Donatella, Rosella,
Cristiana, Alide,
Rita, e Marisa*

Contents

Abbreviations for Works by Henry James	ix
Prologue: Alien Corn and the Arts of Dispossession	1
1. (1843-1869). When I Was (Mostly) Here: the Memoirs of 1913-1914	9
2. (1870-1883). When I Was Betwixt and Between	43
Part 1: Testing Possibilities: Letters from Abroad	43
Part 2: The Aliens: Italians (and James) in Italy and America	70
Part 3: Three Early Fictions as Surrogate Memoirs	84
3. American Happenings: 1859-1883 (When Here); 1883-1904 (While Away).	119
4. (1900-1904). Americans in Absentia – Three Late Novels	163
5. (1904-1905). The Alien's Return	211
Part 1: Apologia pro vita sua/Apologia pro arte sua	212
Part 2: Method and Material	218
Part 3: The ME and the NOT ME	231
6. (1904-1905). America's Problematics	251
Part 1: Elasticity and The Margin	251
Part 2: Dispossessed in One's Own Land	258
Part 3: Missed Opportunities: Novels Not Written	279
Part 4: America's Mutes	282
Part 5: "The Huge Democratic Broom"	289
7. (1905-1916). "Histories" and "History"	295

Part 1: Bringing in the Sheaves (1905-1910)	295
Part 2: Recouping the Past (1910-1914)	298
Part 3: Friendly Alien or British Subject (1914-1915)	304
Part 4: A Necessary Digression	314
Part 5: After (1916)	320
Epilogue: "The Surrounding Accent of the Future"	327

Abbreviations for Works by Henry James

AE	<i>American Essays</i>
AS	<i>The American Scene</i>
BO	<i>The Bostonians</i>
CLHJ	<i>Complete Letters of Henry James</i>
CN	<i>Complete Notebooks of Henry James</i>
EU	<i>The Europeans</i>
HJC	<i>Henry James on Culture</i>
HJE	<i>Henry James Letters</i>
HJH	<i>Hawthorne</i>
HJS	<i>William Wetmore Story and His Friends</i>
IH	<i>Italian Hours</i>
MY	<i>The Middle Years</i>
NSB	<i>Notes of a Son and Brother</i>
NT	<i>Novels and Tales of Henry James</i>
SB	<i>A Small Boy and Others</i>
W&HL	<i>William and Henry James. Selected Letters</i>
WJW	<i>The Works of William James</i>

Note: Both in the main text and in Works Cited James's memoirs (SB, NDB, and MY) take their pagination from Frederick W. Dupee's *Henry James: Autobiography*

Prologue: Alien Corn and the Arts of Dispossession

What, yet another book about Henry James? Yes, but how can it be avoided when confronting a man whose mind is so fine it harbors an endless stock of questions demanding answers? Thus with a sigh and a call to courage, *Henry James: An Alien's "History" of America* takes on the following: James as the eternal Alien, surrounded by others who experience a similar sense of displacement; James as the wielder of Memory, the means by which he tries to establish where he has been and where he is now throughout his existential wanderings; James as negotiator between Art and "the facts of life"; James as the creator of narratives of Consciousness, the primary possession of the Man without a Country.

Etymologically speaking, the term "alien" comes from *alienus* (Latin) taken from *alius* ("another"), which bespeaks of those "unlike other persons." Such types come from places elsewhere, often fated to feel the pain of exile from a paradise lost. Yet there are rare occasions when one achieves the status of the post-alien, awarded possession of a homeland, freed from the grip of memory and the sense of loss it enforces.

There are two pertinent examples that exemplify what the Alien may undergo, one from the Bible and the other from John Keats.

The Biblical Ruth: "And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, *or* to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people *shall be* my people, and thy God my God."

John Keats' Ruth: "the sad heart of Ruth [who] sick for home... stood in tears amid the alien corn."

What does one find when parsing Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" of May 1819? Memories textured into the Romantic imagination by

the Miltonic narrative of *Paradise Lost* have no need to refer directly to the narrative of dispossession that rends the third chapter of *Genesis*. Separated from the land for which it longs, the Soul dreams of following the "immortal bird" in its flight "away" from the Darkness of life's estrangement into the Light of death, the only means by which a mortal may end exile from its longed-for home. In contrast *The Book of Ruth*, contained within the *Hamesh Megillot* section of the Tanakh, offers one of the endless variations on "the overriding concern" of the Hebrew Bible. It treats the anguished span of time and space that blocks the final resolution of God's covenant with Abraham. For had there not been the promise of a return to their land after centuries of exile?

The story goes this way: Ruth, a widowed Moabite woman, chooses to go to Judah with Naomi, her mother-in-law. There she exchanges her identity as a *nokhriyah* (a foreign woman) for that of *ishah* (a primary wife, not a concubine) through her marriage to Boaz, lord of vast grain fields.¹ She foregoes the worship of Chenosh (the god of Moab) and accepts the God of Judah (Sasson, 324-327). Through her choices, she "returns" to her rightful homeland. Under Hebrew law, her son by Boas is considered Naomi's "son." He in turn fathers Jesse, who begets David, ancestor of the House of David, the proud lineage Christianity endows upon the ancestry of Jesus.

The Christian narrative appropriates *The Book of Ruth* as a sacred "prequel" to "the good news" of the New Testament whereby the Paradise lost to mortals in *The Book of Genesis* may be regained. For the Hebrews, The Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible enclosed within the opening sections of the Christian Old Testament) lays down the elements of the plot that will engage them over the rest of human history. The patriarchs are to father generations of the people who, over time and after years of duress, will arrive at the Land of Canaan, thereafter known as the Land of Israel. It is their duty to continue the flow of "begats" that confirm the procreative powers of "seed" and "grain."

In 1216 BCE an inscription to an Egyptian Pharaoh (the source of the first non-Biblical use of the word "Israel") suggests it is not a place but a people. *The Book of Judges* emphasizes they are connected by religious

¹ The Moabites' worship of pagan gods led to the forbidding of its men to wed women of the Israelite nation, although their women (as did Ruth) could, upon taking up the worship of Yahweh.

identity, “rather than ethnicity or common origins.” “They were those who had been marginalized: nomads, semi-nomads, the dispossessed who now began to find ways of settling down and building new lives.” By the late 13th century BCE, as the *Habiru* gathered together in Canaan, “they constructed a new identity, sealed by a God who was not necessarily to be associated with older establishments or older shrines” (MacCulloch, 53).

Ruth lives in the good times. Her story traces how she becomes the ancestress of David, he who will build the ancient Ark of the Covenant, the cultic symbol of Yahweh, as a verification of the promises made to the people of Israel. The people of Israel are in possession of Jerusalem, the site of the First Temple, erected by David’s son Solomon to house the Ark. Upon Solomon’s death, his dominion is rent in two, and the kingdoms of Judah and Israel come under the sway of the Assyrians and other enemy powers. Thereafter, Jewish history is broken into the pre-Exilic Period, the Exilic Diaspora, and the Post-Exilic Periods, when Jews were in thrall to various rulers (Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman). There were those taken away in exile from their homeland, those who had returned, and those who chose never to return to Jerusalem. This culminates in a memory-based politics. It throbs with longing to repossess the lost land, voiced in the prayer during Seder, “Next year in Jerusalem,” followed by the plaintive qualification, “perhaps.”

The Torah records the strictures that dictated where a group might live and those with whom it might mingle. Laws curbed intermarriage between the peoples of the Kingdoms of Israel, Judah, and Moab, yet The Book of Ruth celebrates one of the happier instances in which “alien” groups came together. Unlike the saddened Ruth who flickers through John Keats’ “Ode to the Nightingale” in the far-off England of 1819, the Biblical Ruth need not weep “amid the alien corn.” She will not remain bereft of a homeland and a people she can call her own. She will “return,” assimilated into the homeland promised to those obedient to Yahweh’s will.

What has this tangle of Hebrew history and Biblical narratives to do with Henry James and the fortunes undergone by the aliens of his time? Keats’s Ruth is more likely to nourish the imagination of the Jamesian alien, doomed by memory never to find a permanent home or welcome from a kindred people. He is of the literary line that draws less from The Book of Ruth than from the tonalities of a Keatsian ode. Even so, why another book about James, an author already (to some) excessively covered?

Henry James: An Alien's "History" of America is offered as a "restless analysis" that spreads across James's birth-land (his *Here*) and the world abroad (his *There*). Through his novels, travel essays, letters, and articles of criticism, James reveals the consequences of his reliance on ways of looking back to the past and forward to the future, while standing in the present. The book asks why he felt obliged to remember in the first place, and how he took up these obligations. It ponders why he was always on the move, going and returning, trying to re-possess remembered states of being, when the Place "when I was there" becomes overwhelmed by what happens to that Place "while I was away." It deals with the sense of aloneness that besets the one "dispossessed" of the confidence of a people who "have" a self and a place into which that self fits with full comfort.

James was hardly intent on writing an exegesis of Hebrew history's commitment to regaining one's God-given land or populating it with generations of God's people. Nonetheless, he was at ease with limpid phrases drawn from the literary riches of the Testaments, Old and New. He felt free to use them for his own purposes as titles for his novels: "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain" (*Ecclesiastes*. 12:6) or "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest" (*Psalms*. 55:6). After all, the Big Men waiting in line to take over the romantic-realism of America's next literary generation had no reservations about using vivid quotations from the Old Testament – *The Sun Also Rises* and *Absalom, Absalom!* – just as Keats's "Nightingale" ode lent "tender is the night" to yet another tale of loss and longing.

Although James was not one of the Chosen who obey the demands God placed upon them to procreate, he was a member of a once fertile family.² James never married, leading to the on-going tease over whether he was a celibate, a confirmed homosexual, or a late-bloomer in erotic pleasures. James's narrative world is singularly marked by childless couples and those who die very young.³

² James's grandfather, known as William of Albany, had thirteen children. James's father, Henry James, Sr. had five children, two of whom never married. His brother William had five children, one dead in infancy and the eldest son who remained unmarried.

³ Note the dead sons of Dr. Striker, Lambert Strether, and Isabel Archer, the unfortunate accident that befalls Mrs. Wix's daughter, and the early demises of Miles and Morgan Moreen. Set against the childless states of the Assinghams and

James's writings do not echo Biblical stories of a people committed to prevailing in strange lands. Nonetheless, his International Theme pulses with young and vital American women (Daisy, Isabel, Milly, Charlotte, Maggie) who gather across the European scene. Unlike the Gleaners in Jean-François Millet's painting, they stand impatiently midst the alien corn. They are eager to find their fortunes in new lands, even though their stories often end on the note of the nightingale's song that vanishes "away, away." They also share another quality. For James it was made manifest when he came across "the lonely Aphrodite" in her new home, Boston's Museum of Art. As noted in *The American Scene*, the American who seeks the beauties of Greek art in Greece, must understand

that he has not *seen* a fine Greek thing till he has seen it in America. It is of course on the face of it the most merciless case of transplanting [...].The little Aphrodite, with her connections, her antecedents, and references exhibiting the maximum of breakage, is no doubt as *lonely* a jewel as ever strayed out of its setting... She has lost her background, the divine creature – has lost her company, and is keeping, in a manner, the strangest; but so far from having lost an iota of her power, she has gained unspeakably more, since what she essentially stands for she here stands for alone, rising ineffably to the occasion. She has, in short, by her single presence, as yet, annexed an empire... (AS, 187).

Henry James: An Alien's "History" of America resonates with images of the many who stand alone, dispossessed of their past, yet with much to gain. The Biblical Ruth has no need to remember what is no more. She will soon "return" home to a Place and a People that take her in. In contrast, Keats' Ruth is fixed as an image of exile, burdened and defined by memories of lost things. James understood what this was like. As he wrote Morton Fullerton on October 2, 1900,

The port from which I set out was, I think, that of the *essential loneliness of my life* [...] That loneliness... what is it still but the deepest thing about one? Deeper about *me*, at any rate, than anything else; deeper than my 'genius,' deeper than my 'discipline,' deeper than my pride, deeper, above all, than the deep countermining of art (HJE, 4, 170).

the Ververs, there is the Principino, the son of Maggie and Prince Amerigo, but his ancient heritage has long since been lost.

But after all, it is James's "art" that tells his story. It will be *his* "history" that shapes his autobiography, even as the history of world events colors the "biography" that stretches from birth in 1843 to death in 1916 and beyond.

Here are some of the compelling questions (both brutal and subtle) that direct the manner in which James questioned the nature of those (himself and others) who stand midst the alien corn.

- 1) To what extent does dispossession define one's sense of alienation – the plight of those whose experience breaks with places and peoples through differences in traditions, national histories, "race" groups, class-status, professional ties, sexual needs, and familial mores? As for James, who and what was he? Ought he be typed as an "American," an "Englishman," or neither?
- 2) At what point does memory take on value? Did the position James names here serve him, and his readers, well? In his preface to Vol. 12 of *The Novels and Tales* James makes clear the "delight" he took

in a palpable imaginable *visitable* past – in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table. The table is the one, the common expanse, and where we lean so stretching, we find it firm and continuous. That, to my imagination, is the past fragrant of all, or of almost all, the poetry of the thing outlived and lost and gone, and yet in which the precious element of closeness, telling so of connexions but tasting so of differences, remains appreciable. With more moves back the element of the appreciable shrinks – just as the charm of looking over a garden-wall into another garden breaks down when successions of walls appear [...] The one partition makes the place we have wondered about *other*, both richly and recognisably so; but who shall pretend to impute an effect of composition to the twenty? We are divided of course between liking to feel the past strange and liking to feel it familiar; the difficulty is, for intensity, to catch it at the moment when the scales of the balance hang with the right evenness (*NT*, vol.12, x).

- 3) How far can one entertain the charms of the subjective remembrance of There and Then, while keeping aware of the stern demands of the objective nature of the Here and Now? Is it possible for the Jamesian canon to balance the demands he placed upon it? The boy records what "is." The adult reflects on memories of "was." The critic takes responsibility toward both the "was" and the "is."

The story-teller takes the license to depict his characters' desires to remember after their own fashion. To what end?

- 4) James can be said to defy logic once he puts into practice the rule of the parable, "the last shall be first, and the first shall be last." (Matthew: 20:16). James's official autobiography begins in 1913-1914 with the publication of *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, where he narrates his recollections of the America he knew in the late 1840s and early '60s. This realignment waves aside the good manners exacted by the chronological progression upon which biography relies.

The relationship of the "early" and the "late" texts by James are a secularized variation on the medieval use of *figura*, so succinctly described by Erich Auerbach. This rhetorical method supports the continual flow through time by which the "first" in a series of historical events affects the future. It "signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first." (Auerbach, 100). James's writings hardly serve, as did the patristic tradition, as an interpretation of the Christian New Testament that verifies that Christ's arrival on earth had been announced in the Old Testament of the Hebrews. James's memoirs only offer a sense of what it had been like to be young in a still relatively young nation. They trace the Then that merges with the Now of 1904-1905 where James's *The American Scene* tests the shakily held promise that the "good news" will come to pass in his native land. His ability to predict future events is less trustworthy than "The Book of Ruth" in vouching that "perhaps" a better world will be attained. James's youthful foretelling of a world in 1879 where "the worst" was over was shattered in 1914 by the breakdown of whatever prophetic power *figura* might hold. He learned there are no guarantees for meanings "fixed in" advance. He becomes aligned with the unending flight of the Keatsian nightingale, whose meaning is "always fundamentally incomplete" (Auerbach, 100).

It has to be seen what is gained by letting James's "last" (his printed texts that come "first") play their part within this "biography" of an "autobiography" once it takes up a familiar chronological march toward its conclusion in 1916.

- 5) Which paths are wisest for writers to take – paths guided by a genre that lets them write what they "know" (the real) or the one (the romantic) that insists that they can never know? Why did James mount the case for the necessity of attending to these contending forms of "telling"?

The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another [...] The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thoughts, and our desire (*NT*, vol. 2, xvi-xii).

- 6) James came to feel uneasy over America's experiment in Democracy. Was it a gift or a doom that it was determined by its Margin (limitless spaces) and its Elasticity (an unchecked capacity to "do more")? And all for what purpose?

Plagued and energized by these and other questions, *Henry James: An Alien's "History" of America* places its arguments (sometimes outrageous) before its readers in the chapters that follow.

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Name index

- Adams, Henry 27, 43-4, 50, 52, 98, 115, 119, 134-137, 166, 176, 193, 205, 212-5, 217, 228, 231, 234, 268-9, 271-2, 290, 304, 305, 307, 318, 319
- Aleichem, Sholum 333
- Anesko, Michael 38 n., 46 n., 120, 148 n., 300, 303
- Armstrong, Paul 296-7, 297 n., 298, 303
- Arnold, Matthew 223 n., 260
- Auerbach, Eric 7, 337 n.
- Balanchine, George 194-5, 199, 204-5, 206
- Barnum, P. T. 21, 92, 116, 259
- Bausch, Pina 205-6
- Beerbohm, Max 211
- Benjamin, Walter 303, 319
- Besant, Walter 95
- Boott, Elizabeth 107, 120
- Cahan, Abraham 329, 331, 334
- Clemens, Samuel L. (Mark Twain) 27, 36, 38, 119, 121 n., 122, 158, 245, 280, 320
- Conrad, Joseph 226, 315, 322 n., 325
- Curtis, David and Ariana 107, 132, 166, 174 n.
- Dalrymple, Walter 314
- Dickens, Charles 21, 37-8, 92, 214, 245
- Dixon, Thomas 123, 266 n.
- Dreiser, Theodore 187-93, 195 n., 202, 206, 281
- Dreyfus, Alfred 122
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 121
- Du Maurier, George 120, 178 n.
- Edel, Leon 46, 86, 148, 314, 323 n., 324
- Eliot, Charles W. 64, 144-7, 229, 307
- Eliot, T. S. 22, 149, 166, 217-8, 236
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo 89, 97, 150, 232-4, 260, 280, 319
- Faulkner, William 166, 263-4, 285, 301, 306-7
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott 32, 95, 166, 176
- Flagler, Morrison 244-5, 247
- Ford, Henry 329, 331, 333, 335
- Franklin, Benjamin 176, 182, 215
- Freud, Sigmund 121, 308, 317 n.
- Gardner, Isabella Stewart 47, 132
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 42, 155, 224 n.
- Goodwin, Doris Kerns 27 n., 281, 314 n.
- Graham, Martha 205-6
- Hale, Edward 134, 137, 163, 184, 268-71
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel 32-3, 49, 67, 97, 138, 149-51, 153, 160, 162, 306
- Hemingway, Ernest 95, 166, 285
- Howe, Julia Ward 27, 128, 130
- Howells, William Dean 27, 49, 55,

- 113-4, 119, 120 n., 135, 158, 250, 300
- Hunt, William Morris 25, 128-9, 130-1
- James, Alice 51, 53, 57, 62-4, 85-7,
90-1, 123, 129, 136, 148, 298, 300,
321 n., 340
- James, Garth Wilkinson (Wilky) 15, 27,
30, 121 n., 129, 136, 150, 300 n., 304
- James, Henry:
- American Habitats
- New York: 11, 15-23, 27-9, 32,
50-2, 74, 76-8, 80, 85-6, 92-3, 97,
111, 117, 119-20, 124-5, 130-4,
135-6, 141-2, 167, 186, 216, 218-
20, 228, 230-1, 233, 235-42, 244,
247-8, 251, 259-61, 263, 268,
272, 275-9, 281, 283-4, 287-90,
292, 299, 309, 329-31, 336
- Newport: 17, 20, 23 n., 25-8,
63, 124-34, 135, 137, 216, 235,
248, 259, 273, 282, 304, 309-10
- Cambridge: 28-31, 46, 49, 124,
129-30, 134-9, 143, 145-8, 159,
227, 230-1, 304, 313
- Boston: 5, 27, 29, 31-2, 53, 63,
89, 97-8, 110, 112 n., 120, 124,
128, 129, 130, 132, 133-4, 135-
6, 137-9, 141-5, 147, 148, 150,
151 n., 157-60, 216, 221, 227-9,
235-6, 259-60, 263, 268-72, 275,
282, 290, 304
- American Locales
- New England: 26, 31-2, 49, 61,
75, 89, 97-8, 100-6, 124, 132-4,
137-8, 144, 149-50, 157-9, 182,
218-9, 221, 223-6, 233, 236,
245, 260, 263, 303
- Philadelphia: 236, 272-5, 283,
290
- Washington, D. C.: 50, 52, 134,
136, 141, 143, 171, 230, 262,
288-9, 290-3, 312
- Richmond: 121-2, 236, 263-
265, 268
- The West: 106, 216, 245-6, 253,
294 n.
- Abroad
- Family Excursions: 17-8, 19-
24, 30-1, 85-6, 87, 92, 128-9
- On His Own: 16-7, 23-4, 32-3,
43-69, 107, 305
- Settling In: 17, 48, 53, 117, 305-
7, 309-13
- Cultural "Types"
- Americans: 48-50, 53-5, 64, 85,
97-110, 149-53, 163-6, 168-
70, 173, 175-9, 182, 189-91,
199-201, 204-9, 225-8, 230-1,
246-50, 251-4, 257-8, 273-83,
287-94, 309, 312-3, 327-37
- Blacks: 28, 121-3, 125-7, 141 n.,
232, 249, 256, 258-68, 280, 281
n., 283, 329
- British: 45, 49, 55-7, 150, 168-
71, 225, 239, 310-3, 332
- French: 45 n., 49, 56, 107-8, 113,
122, 177-8, 180-1, 184-6, 309
- Italian: 59-64, 67-84, 101, 208-
9, 223, 262, 278, 283, 330
- Irish: 12-3, 123 n., 125, 127,
130, 141-2, 145 n., 259, 278,
283, 329, 332
- Jews: 74, 125, 126, 133 n., 141 n.,
156 n., 179, 183, 228, 278, 328-35
- Publications
- The American Scene*: 5, 7, 19,
26-8, 36, 38-40, 45, 65, 75, 77,
110, 122, 133, 141, 146-7, 200,
212-94, 295, 299, 301, 303, 306,
309, 311 n., 315-6, 318, 324-37
- Essays:
- "The Art of Fiction": 95, 231
- Italian Hours*: 46 n., 59, 61, 69-
84, 296, 301
- "Is There a Life After Death?":
320-4
- Memoirs:

- A Small Boy and Others*: 7, 10-4, 18-24, 28-9, 33-6, 40-1, 43-4, 66, 85-6, 89, 91, 94, 116, 149, 212, 259-60, 278, 298, 303-4, 323
- Notes of a Son and Brother*: 7, 10, 14, 18-20, 24, 28, 33-6, 40-1, 43-4, 66, 85, 129, 134, 149, 212, 231, 258, 268, 271, 273, 298, 303-5, 309
- The Middle Years*: 33, 44-6
- Novels:
- The Ambassadors*: 4 n., 39-40, 58, 86, 94, 97, 108, 162, 167, 169, 175-86, 192, 194-5, 198-200, 210, 267, 285-6
- The American*: 13 n., 40, 54, 65-6, 84-5, 92-3, 96, 105-14, 135, 198-9, 250 n.
- The Bostonians*: 85, 136-44, 145 n., 146 n., 148-61, 303
- The Europeans*: 68, 84-5, 96-101, 105-6, 110, 135, 144, 167, 207, 303
- The Golden Bowl*: 13 n., 37, 42, 58, 83, 99 n., 109, 150, 162, 167, 183, 186-210, 254-7, 286-7, 297, 322 n., 325
- The Portrait of a Lady*: 4 n., 19, 34, 55, 58, 68, 84, 105 n., 132-3, 136, 157, 161-2, 169, 177-8, 183, 200, 267, 286, 294, 297, 302
- Roderick Hudson*: 44, 68, 80 n., 84-5, 88, 96, 101-7, 110, 135, 144, 167, 178-9, 194, 297
- The Wings of the Dove*: 34, 37, 44, 80 n., 108-9, 157 n., 161, 168-75, 180, 183, 186, 189, 193, 200, 286, 296
- Prefaces (New York Edition): 6, 28, 36, 38-41, 54-5, 65-6, 102 n., 111-4, 116, 192, 200, 231, 277, 295-9, 303, 323, 325, 334, 337
- James, Henry, Sr. 4, 13-4, 16, 19, 23-5, 31, 39, 48, 51, 56, 57, 62, 86, 89, 128-9, 132, 134, 136, 143, 149-50, 154, 214, 280, 298, 300, 323
- James, Mary Walsh 31, 47, 53, 56, 61, 89, 121 n., 123 n., 136, 143
- James, Robertson (Bob) 15, 27, 121 n., 129, 136, 150
- James, William 4 n., 14-5, 18 n., 24, 25, 27, 34, 39, 44, 45 n., 47, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 61, 63, 67, 80, 85-6, 90 n., 119 n., 122 n., 128-9, 130, 134, 136, 146, 147 n., 149, 151, 153, 157 n., 158 n., 164, 192-3, 206 n., 235, 258 n., 259, 298, 304, 318, 320, 323
- James, William-of-Albany 4, 12, 13, 149, 279, 282, 300 n.
- Joukowsky, Paul 56-7
- Keats, John 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 22, 24, 33, 35, 44, 82, 85, 207, 227, 232, 234 n., 296, 316, 319, 337
- Kern, Stephen 308
- La Farge, John 44, 60-1, 129-30, 166
- Lee, Robert E. 236, 265
- Lincoln, Abraham 29, 32, 305-6
- Lowell, James Russell 44 n., 135, 231, 307
- McClure, Samuel 280-1
- McWhirter, David 38 n., 296-8, 303
- Melville, Herman 38, 200, 214, 235, 255-7, 280, 311 n.
- Norton, Charles Eliot 64, 304, 309
- Norton, Grace 52, 60, 62-3
- Peabody, Elizabeth 151
- Perry, Thomas Sergeant 43, 48, 129-30, 136
- Pinker, James 120 n., 295, 300
- Poe, Edgar Allan 200, 232, 254-7, 325
- Posnock, Ross 296-7, 299, 303, 308 n., 324, 331
- Pullman, George 120 n., 234-5,

- 245-6, 267, 293
- Richardson, Dorothy 218
- Ricoeur, Paul 297-8
- Riis, Jacob 216 n., 277, 278
- Roosevelt, Theodore 30, 87 n.,
119, 163-6, 173, 179, 181, 207,
215, 230, 280-1, 288, 307, 311
n., 318-9, 329, 333, 335
- Roth, Philip 304-5
- Ruskin, John 64, 75-6
- Ruth 1-3, 5, 7, 85, 296, 319, 337
- Saint-Gaudens, Augustus 9, 159
n., 235
- Spencer, Sidney 320
- Stensrud, Rockwell 128, 132, 134
- Story, William Wetmore 67-8, 84,
101, 158, 166
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher 92-3, 159,
259-60
- Tarbell, Ida 123, 281
- Temple, Mary (Minny) 33-5, 44,
47, 128-9, 135, 137, 212 n.
- Trollope, Frances 245
- Vattel, Emmerich de 163, 313
- Wagner, Richard 57, 335
- Walker, Pierre A. 282-3, 303, 307
n., 309, 312, 314
- West, Rebecca 162, 191
- Wharton, Edith 119, 132, 166, 225,
310 n., 311
- Whitman, Walt 17, 30, 57, 317
- Wilde, Oscar 120 n., 122, 122 n.,
159 n., 284
- Woolson, Constance Fenimore
212 n.
- Zacharias, Greg W. 303

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