“IMPROVISED EUROPEANS”: THOUGHTS ON AN ASPECT OF HENRY JAMES AND T.S. ELIOT

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I

In 1903 Henry James published a biographical work called William Wetmore Story and his Friends. It has attracted little critical attention, partly because the writing of it was largely an act of piety and friendship on James’s part, partly because William Wetmore Story is no longer a name to conjure with, yet the book’s theme is integrally connected with one that preoccupied James throughout his creative life. Story had been an expatriate American sculptor, one of the many who in the nineteenth century had settled in Italy, but one of the few to achieve an international reputation. His work had provided a creative stimulus to Nathaniel Hawthorne in the writing of his novel The Marble Faun (1860). James had met Story in Rome in 1873 and the extent to which Story’s life suggested to James some of the basic ideas for his novel Roderick Hudson (1875) is a matter of critical commonplace. Both these novels explore the theme of the American artist exposed to the heady excitement and potential corruption of Europe. One reader who, at the time of its publication, was quick to respond to William Wetmore Story and his Friends had known James for some thirty years, and he too had, in his own way, been much concerned with the impact of the Old World on the American psyche.

Henry Adams, great-grandson of the second President of the United States, grandson of the sixth President, and son of the American Minister to the Court of St James during the crucial period of the American Civil War, came from a New England patrician background very different from that of Henry James in New York. Brought up in the ethos of what he was to characterise as “eighteenth-century troglodytic Boston”, Adams, whatever

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 9 March 1983.
2 This and subsequent quotations (identified hereafter as “Adams, Education”) are from the book The Education of Henry Adams, published by Houghton
his aspirations may have been, never achieved political office himself, though he wielded considerable power behind the scenes in Washington. A Professor of History at Harvard, editor of The North American Review, author of a monumental History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison as well as of two very interesting minor novels published anonymously, and an inveterate globe-trotter whose travels took him from Russia to the South Seas, Adams had a range of experience and interests far wider than James's, more intellectual, and more varied. The relationship between the two men was of long duration but not easy to define. In the seventies and the eighties they met in London, in Paris and in Washington, but with an increasing sense of their differences. Adams's wife in particular was sceptical about "that young emigrant" as she disparagingly called James, adding:

I think the real, live, vulgar, quick-paced world in America will fret him and that he prefers a quiet corner with a pen where he can create men and women who say neat things and have refined tastes and are not nasal or eccentric.\(^3\)

Although at a dinner in the White House in 1880 she had "stoutly defended Henry James and Daisy Miller", both she and Adams found The Portrait of a Lady too much for them, and it was Marian Adams who coined the celebrated epigram about James's work: "It's not that he 'bites off more than he can chaw', ... but he chaws more than he bites off".\(^4\)

James, however, could be equally caustic, and when he left the States in 1882 he sent Mrs. Adams a letter, apostrophising her as "the incarnation of her native land". Marian Adams was quick to recognise this as "a most equivocal compliment, coming from him. Am I then", she asked, "vulgar, dreary, and impossible to live with?"\(^5\) Two years later, in the short story "Pandora", James

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\(^4\) Ibid., p. 306.

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 384.
was to sum up the Adamses in a commonly-recognised portrait as Mr. and Mrs. Bonnycastle:

the couple had taken upon themselves the responsibilities of an active patriotism; they thought it right to live in America, differing therein from a great many of their acquaintance, who only thought it expensive ... [Y]ou knew they had lived in Europe only by their present exultation, never in the least by their regrets.⁶

If, to begin with, Adams seemed to stand for America and James against it, twenty years later when they came most closely together it was as a result of this same preoccupation with America and Europe, and it was Adams whose position had changed more in the interval.

Adams read *William Wetmore Story and his Friends* in Paris and wrote to James, on 18 November 1903, with unusual enthusiasm:

It is a tour de force, of course, but that you knew from the first. Whether you have succeeded or not, I cannot say, because it all spreads itself out as though I had written it ... Verily I believe I wrote it. Except your specialty of style, it is me ... [Y]ou have written not Story's life but your own and mine.

The title of this paper comes from that letter, for Adams continues:

You make me curl up, like a trodden-on worm. Improvised Europeans, we were, and,—Lord God!—how thin! No, but it is too cruel! Long ago—at least thirty years ago—I discovered it, and have painfully held my tongue about it. You strip us, gently and kindly, like a surgeon, and I feel your knife in my ribs.⁷

Adams here, the trodden-on worm who has held his tongue, could almost be exclaiming

⁶ The story was first published in 1884 and the extract quoted is from Henry James, *Stories Revived in Three Volumes*, (London, Macmillan & Co., 1885), i. 104. F. O. Matthiessen, in *The American Novels and Stories of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen, (New York, Knopf, 1947), prints a variant text of "Pandora" (source not identified) which reads, for "who only thought it expensive", "who only, with some grimness, thought it inevitable".

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

James’s skill as the surgeon who
plies the steel
That questions the distempered part

leaves Adams “like a patient etherised upon a table”, with a sensation “as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen”. Certainly in this letter Adams feels himself “formulated, sprawling on a pin ... pinned and wriggling on the wall” just as much as does the J. Alfred Prufrock from whose “Love Song” most of those last quotations are taken. Conveniently transposed quotations do not constitute a case, but they may usefully introduce, in the similarity of their imagery, one of the parallels with which this paper is concerned.

Adams’s memorable phrase “improvised Europeans” also finds something of an echo in Eliot, this time in an essay on Henry James:

It is the final perfection, the consummation of an American to become, not an Englishman, but a European—something which no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become.

Adams’s phrase also recognises the process as one of “becoming”, differing from Eliot’s statement only in its saddened acceptance of the fact that Adams himself, James and Story have failed to achieve that final consummation, have managed nothing more satisfactory than an improvisation. That this thought should have been prompted by James’s biography of Story is the more understandable when we come upon James’s statement there that

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8 Of these five quotations all except the second are from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962, pp. 13-17. The second is from “East Coker”, ibid., p. 201. These and subsequent quotations from Collected Poems 1909-1962 are reprinted by permission of the publishers who hold the copyright, Faber and Faber Ltd. in the U.K. and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. in the U.S.A.

“Europe, for Americans, has, in a word, been made easy” and we remember Mr. Touchett’s uneasiness over Ralph’s plans for Isabel that it may not be right to make everything so easy for a person. If made too easy, the organic process of becoming may degenerate into the process of mere improvisation, especially when Europe has been made easy in the particular way that James goes on amusingly to define:

It has really ceased to be feasible, in other words, to get away from America. The west is in the east, the east, by the same token, more and more in the west, and every one and everything everywhere and anywhere but where they, in the vernacular, belong. Where any one or anything does belong is no longer a determinable, is scarce even a discussable, matter. In the simpler age I speak of these congruities might still be measured.

This retrospective envy of the surer moral values of the past is common to all three writers, as is the concern with the problem of “belonging” as well as “becoming”. The sense of deracination that James expresses here in his own idiom is closely akin to that vision of a bewildering new “multiverse” so brilliantly defined in The Education of Henry Adams and epitomised in one sentence: “Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man”.

II

It was in part this dream of order that led both James and Eliot into those not always felicitous flirtations with the theatre to which they devoted so much energy and which attracted so mixed a reception. The drawing-room comedy and the drama of sophisticated society that attracted them both are forms of drama that seek to impose some sense of order on our social relations. This may work if, as in the best comedies of manners, the dramatist really believes in that social existence, but this is where Eliot in particular sabotages the very vehicle he has commandeered: the kind of order he seeks to impose is so alien to

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10 Henry James, William Wetmore Story and his Friends (Edinburgh, London and Boston, 1903), i. 4.
12 James, William Wetmore Story, i. 27-8.
the form he chooses that he often bewilders and sometimes loses the sympathy of his audience. He once defined his attitude to writing for the theatre with an unexpected colloquial frankness in a letter to Ezra Pound:

But IF you can keep the bloody audience's attention engaged, then you can perform any monkey tricks you like when they ain't looking, and it's what you do behind the audience's back so to speak that makes your play IMMORTAL for a while.14

As playwrights both James and Eliot are inclined to rely too much on monkey tricks to engage the attention of an under-estimated audience. Thus, having admired a drinking scene in a French comedy, James somewhat incongruously introduced an imitation of it into Guy Domville, the historical drama with which he came nearest to achieving a success in the London theatre: the critics so signally failed to admire James's version that he hastily eliminated it without any damage to the plot. So too in The Cocktail Party Eliot overworks hackneyed music-hall gags such as the reappearance of Julia at awkward moments, the repetition of catch phrases and of the ground-nuts joke, or Edward's ending of a very short telephone conversation, in which he has used Alex's name four times, with the gratuitous information to the listening Celia "That was Alex". Devices such as these, ineptly used, far from keeping our attention engaged, distract it: the real interest of The Cocktail Party lies in what Eliot is doing behind our back but the more meretricious elements too often obscure the real theme.

We are introduced to a group of sophisticated upper-middleclass people who are bored with the inanities of their existence. Edward, the successful barrister, has been too much engrossed in his professional duties to give enough attention to his wife Lavinia. She, at the beginning of the play, has left him after having an abortive affair with his younger friend Peter. Edward meanwhile has been carrying on a more desultory relationship with Celia, a young lady with whom Peter also believes himself in love. Peter innocently asks Edward to put in a good word for him with Celia, a situation of some irony which James had also exploited.

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in the first act of *Guy Domville*. Celia, however, is far too preoccupied with her own inner problems to have much interest in either of these ineffectual philanderers. She, Edward and Lavinia are all driven by desperation at their own bewildered purposelessness to consult the same psychiatrist who helps them to solve their problems for themselves. Edward and Lavinia, coming to recognise their own identities more clearly, are reconciled to each other and to the human condition. Celia retires into a mysterious sanatorium from which she emerges with a sense of social responsibility amounting to spiritual dedication.

Ever since its first production at the Edinburgh Festival in 1949 the play has had its share of adverse criticism, much of it wilful and overstated. It is not Eliot at his greatest, either dramatically or poetically, but, to adapt Marian Adams's phrase, what it bites off is of more significance than what it appears to chew. The rather arch, playful mystification of the first act defeats its object: who is this unidentified guest at the cocktail party and how does he come to know so much? When, in Act II, he is identified as Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly, an eminent psychiatrist, the confusion worsens, for his handling of his cases seems highly unprofessional, as does his singular indifference to the question of fees, and his sanatorium, although we never see it, does not sound likely to gain the approval of the B.M.A. or the Department of Health. How compulsive a hold this idea of the sanatorium has on Eliot's imagination is unexpectedly re-stressed nine years after *The Cocktail Party* in another play, *The Elder Statesman*. Two acts of this are set in Badgley Court,

A convalescent home
With the atmosphere of an hotel—
Nothing about it to suggest the clinic—
Everything about it to suggest recovery.15

There are half-a-dozen more obvious and more plausible devices whereby Lord Claverton could have been brought into contact with those two people from his past whom the story requires him to meet again. The sanatorium is not even as relevant here as in *The Cocktail Party* where the psychiatrist in the cast list gives it some

validation, yet Eliot goes out of his way to locate in it all of The Elder Statesman except the exposition. Such dramatic resolution as there is of a disappointingly undramatic conflict is effected not only in but by this convalescent home atmosphere.

That major and perceptive commentator on both James and Eliot, F. O. Matthiessen, pointed out long ago the extent to which The Family Reunion is indebted to Henry James's ghost stories, especially to "The Jolly Corner". Matthiessen died in 1950, the year in which The Cocktail Party was published, and no one, to my knowledge, has called attention to the interesting parallel that is afforded to that play by one of Henry James's short stories, first published in 1900, "The Great Good Place".

This is the story of George Dane, the highly successful man of letters, who resembles Edward and Lord Claverton in that his immersion in and success with his public and professional career have left him too tired to cope adequately with the demands of his private life. The story opens with him—again like Edward—confronting a string of social engagements from which he recoils in horror and revulsion: how can he go through with it? His manservant valiantly tries to help him sort out his lunch engagements, much as Alex tries to help Edward look after his domestic needs. Dane opens a telegram and the following dialogue ensues (I extricate it from the connecting narrative):

[DANE] "Do hope you sweetly won't mind, today, 1.30, my bringing poor dear Lady Mullet who is so awfully bent".
[BROWN] Is she—a—deformed, sir?
[DANE] No; she's only bent on coming.17

The flippant, Oscar Wilde-ish superficiality of that exchange is, in its tone and in its rather self-conscious playing for an easy laugh, not far removed from the opening scene of The Cocktail Party: the telegram might almost have been sent by the inconsequential Julia. This tone characterises the opening scene of the play and the first section of the story, and in both cases the writer is deliberately


17 Excerpts from "The Great Good Place" and Preface to Vol. XVI of The Novels and Tales by Henry James are reprinted with the permission of Charles Scribner's Sons from the New York Edition. Copyright 1909 Charles Scribner's Sons; copyright renewed 1927 Henry James. This passage is on p. 229. Page references for subsequent excerpts will be given in the text.
aiming at a deceptive effect of the sophisticated drawing-room comedy in order to heighten, by contrast, the dramatic significance of what follows. George Bernard Shaw does something similar, though with greater theatrical success, in *Heartbreak House*.

At the end of his tether, George Dane is, again like Edward, confronted by an unidentified guest, with whose arrival the first section of the story comes to an end. With an abrupt, unexplained transition the second section shows us Dane in a different, vaguely-defined setting, talking to a new-found friend. This is the great good place of the title, and they discuss the impression it makes on them. It reminds them of a country house in which they are guests, a club, a "hotel without noise", a temple, a spa, a convalescent home, a sanatorium, though to this suggestion Dane demurs in these words:

"Ah, that, it seems to me, scarcely puts it. You were n't ill — were you? I'm sure I really was n't. I was only, as the world goes too 'beastly well'!"

(p. 258).

In *The Cocktail Party* Celia tells Reilly:

I suppose most people, when they come to see you, Are obviously ill, or can give good reasons For wanting to see you. Well, I can't. I just came in desperation ...
... I feel perfectly well, I could lead an active life.18

The "hotel without noise" or "the convalescent home with the atmosphere of an hotel" is by its very nature an indication that its inmates are really neither well nor ill "as the world goes". On his arrival at Badgley Court Lord Claverton is told explicitly:

We don't want our guests to think of themselves as ill, Though we never have guests who are perfectly well ...

You know, we have been deluged with applications From people who wanted to come here to die!

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We never accept them. Nor do we accept any guest who looks incurable.¹⁹

The convalescent home, that is, is a means to life, and although Lord Claverton does die there he has at least demonstrated that he is not incurable. George Dane, however, has admitted to a sort of illness:

"I seemed, as it happened, in the endless press and stress, to have lost possession of my soul and to be surrounded only with the affairs of other people, smothered in mere irrelevant importunity. It made me literally ill". (p. 243).

What the great good place has given him he recognises in these terms:

The real exquisite was to be without the complication of an identity, and the greatest boon of all, doubtless, the solid security, the clear confidence one could feel. (p. 250).

Part of this security comes from the new-found sense of brotherhood, of belonging, of the re-establishment of real contact with other like-minded people. At the beginning of the story Dane has felt a strong "disposition not to touch—no, not with the finger. Ah, if he might never again touch!" (p. 232), just as Celia has found "It no longer seems worth while to speak to anyone".²⁰

In the great good place this gives way to a sense of belonging and Dane luxuriates in a new awareness, so that "the blest fact of consciousness seemed the greatest thing of all" (p. 235). His old personality and the cares and responsibilities with which he was beset have been mysteriously taken over by the unidentified visitor in the first section of the tale. Dane has been given "all sorts of freedoms — always, for the occasion, the particular right one" (p. 252), and, revitalised, he can see everything in a new light. The friend he has found since arriving in the great good place "was always new and yet at the same time—it was amusing, not disturbing—suggested the possibility that he might be but an old one altered" (p. 254). From The Four Quartets through The Cocktail Party and The Confidential Clerk this idea of the

¹⁹ The Elder Statesman, p. 46.
²⁰ The Cocktail Party, p. 118.
constantly changing identity has been a dominant one in Eliot's work. It too is re-formulated in *The Elder Statesman* when the old friends re-encountered are found to be so altered that Lord Claverton can overcome the threat they represent

> Because they are not real ... They are merely ghosts:
> Spectres from my past. They've always been with me
> Though it was not till lately that I found the living persons
> Whose ghosts tormented me, to be only human beings,
> Malicious, petty, and I see myself emerging
> From my spectral existence into something like reality.²¹

—and we are back at once with *The Family Reunion*.

### III

In "The Great Good Place" the logic of the fable requires George Dane similarly to emerge from his utopian existence into reality, and it is with disappointment that the reader finds James having recourse to the trite though time-honoured device whereby his hero wakes up to discover it was all a dream. However, the stranger who had arrived at the beginning of the story is real enough: he is still there, and while Dane has slept the young man has set all his affairs to rights for him, and we leave Dane, as we leave Edward and Lavinia, facing the old situation with a new equanimity and confidence. One regrets that James's imagination was not equal to a stronger, less hackneyed, resolution of the plot, but the dream device makes it clear that the great good place is not to be thought of literally. However, to rationalise the ending by saying, as one commentator says, that Dane "has gained the perfect confidential secretary"²² is to undervalue one element of the mystery that the story has so elaborately tried to generate.

Another critic dismisses the story contemptuously as "one of the oddest, most self-centered, luxury-loving and utterly selfish 'utopias' ever dreamed of. It is unique indeed to the point of being ludicrous".²³ This is too harsh, and some aspects of the story at least encourage more sympathetic speculation. A great writer's less successful pieces may sometimes reveal more clearly than his

²¹ *The Elder Statesman*, p. 85.
masterpieces what was important to him, as distinct from what his readers find important and cherish as having a particular meaning for them. Of course “The Great Good Place” is a piece of escapist fantasy but it reflects a very human and not unfamiliar reaction of a busy mind under unusual pressure. George Dane will at moments suggest to us the Henry James of Marian Adams’s description who “prefers a quiet corner with a pen” to “the real, live, vulgar, quick-paced world”, but the serenity to which he is transported is of value to him as bringing, not isolation, but a companionship more worthwhile than the superficial acquaintance of celebrity-hunting enthusiasts which seems to have constituted Dane’s only alternative to the intolerable demands of routine drudgery of which he has wearied. Indisputably, “The Great Good Place” does not show James at his best, yet when he wrote it he was already on the threshold of what is accepted as the major creative phase of his long career. In the next five years he was to publish The Sacred Fount, The Wings of the Dove, The Ambassadors, and The Golden Bowl. Why, when he was meditating themes of that grandeur, should he occupy himself with this fantasy unless for self-indulgent relaxation?

To such questions his notebooks will usually provide at least some hint of an answer, but on “The Great Good Place” the notebooks are silent. Out of the dozens of short stories that he wrote, it is one of only nine that receive no mention at all, though the editors of the Notebooks argue convincingly that “the first faint stirrings of one the themes” of “The Great Good Place”, the dream-framework, may be found in 1892 as one idea, later abandoned, for the story called “The Middle Years”. Both stories were subsequently collected in Volume 16 of the New York Edition of James’s works. In the Preface to that volume James has much to say on the genesis and writing of “The Middle Years”, but of “The Great Good Place” he remarks coyly that “it embodies a calculated effect, and to plunge into it, I find, even for a beguiled glance—a course I indeed recommend—is to have left all else outside”. His only other observation on it is that “to the spirit of [it], however, it strikes me, any gloss or comment would be a tactless challenge” (pp. ix-x). This did not deter F. O. Matthiessen from a comment less sympathetic to James than

usual: "A fantasy of another world cast so overwhelmingly in the luxury products of this one betrays the vulgarity into which James could fall through the very dread of being vulgar".25

Vulgarity is a severe term to describe the exclusivity of patrician comfort that James envisages. The great good place evokes for the two conversationalists associations not so much of luxury products as of upper-class resorts such as the hotel, the spa, the country house, the gentlemen’s club. That Dane thinks of and refers to his interlocutor as “the Brother” has, among other resonances, a suggestion of Freemasonry. The milieu is one in which James himself delighted, but, although nothing in the story absolutely requires it, the provenance is deliberately and specifically English. The club atmosphere is explicitly linked with London (p. 238), and references to currency are in terms of sovereigns and shillings (p. 248) and sixpence (p. 240). The characters speculate on whether the place is in Surrey, Kent or Hampshire, agreeing that it is not far from town and that, although it is very different from Bradford, it is certainly in “the beloved British islands” (p. 257). Dane’s nationality is never specified but in his enthusiasm for the atmosphere of the place there is a hint of the expatriate eager to assimilate to new surroundings, an improvised European. In The Innocents Abroad Mark Twain at one point abandons his burlesque of European guides and European culture in order to comment on the tranquillising effect Europe is having on himself and his travelling companions:

Day by day we lose some of our restlessness and absorb some of the spirit of quietude and ease that is in the tranquil atmosphere about us and in the demeanour of the people. We grow wise apace. We begin to comprehend what life is for.26

At a more sophisticated level George Dane’s reaction to the great good place is the same as this.

Yet, for all these connotations, it would be simplistic merely to identify the great good place as an American’s view of Europe. There is another important range of imagery on which James

draws to convey his vision: the place is thought of as "a sacred silent convent", "some great abode of an Order, some mild Monte Cassino, some Grande Chartreuse more accessible" (p. 236). The word "cloister" occurs frequently in the text and the term "Brother" takes on a second connotation in this context. Six years after writing this story James returned, for the first time after an absence of almost twenty five years, to the United States. It was the visit on which he was to base *The American Scene* (1907), a travel book in which, writing of Harvard, he says

[A] new and higher price, in American conditions, is attaching to the cloister, literally—the place inaccessible (to put it most pertinently) to the shout of the newspaper, the place to perambulate, the place to think, apart from the crowd.  

Although he sees the American as most in need of the cloister, it is implicit here that the cloister is a European rather than an American institution. The same connotation is implicit in the short story, the vocabulary of the two pieces is demonstrably similar, and for Dane it is only in the great good place that

The inner life woke up again, and it was the inner life, for people of his generation, victims of the modern madness, mere maniacal extension and motion, that was returning health. (p. 251).

To Mark Twain's imagination, too, Europe had presented itself as an asylum from "our restless, driving, vitality-consuming marts at home". In similar vein in *William Wetmore Story and his Friends* James had remarked

That is logically the ground of our envy of other generations ... they were not always on the way to some other [destination], snatching a mouthful between trains.

In 1907, the year in which *The American Scene* was published, Henry Adams circulated privately among his friends the first privately-printed edition of his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*. Here, changing James's image of the train only slightly, Adams diagnoses a similar disease and also ascribes it to America:

28 Mark Twain, op. cit., p. 241.
29 James, *William Wetmore Story*, i. 18.
The typical American man had his hand on a lever and his eye on a curve in his road; his living depended on keeping up an average speed of forty miles an hour, tending always to become sixty, eighty, or a hundred, and he could not admit emotions or anxieties or subconscious distractions, more than he could admit whiskey or drugs, without breaking his neck.30

This must be one of the first appearances in this symbolic role in American literature of what Eliot was to call "the sound of horns and motors".31 It anticipates significantly the imagery of *The Great Gatsby* in this respect.

Adams himself, however, was by no means implacably opposed to the automobile, and the juxtaposition of the car and the cloister finds a happy formulation in his remark, in a letter from Paris dated 17th June 1902, that "My idea of paradise is a perfect automobile going thirty miles an hour on a smooth road to a twelfth-century cathedral".32 This will immediately suggest to the reader familiar with the Adams canon his erudite but stimulating excursion into medieval history, architecture and culture in *Mont-St-Michel and Chartres* (1904), but the idea of modern motion coming to find peace in the cloister, literal or metaphorical, is central to the theme of this paper.

IV

What the great good place gives George Dane he compares at one point to "the break that lucky Catholics have always been able to make, that they're still, with their innumerable religious houses, able to make, by going into 'retreat'" (p. 240). On the next page he speaks of the relief the unknown breakfast visitor has afforded him in these words: "I just dropped my burden — and he received it". In *The Cockrail Party*, when Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly, the unidentified guest of the first act, is practising as a psychiatrist, he dismisses his clients with the explicit injunction to "go their ways and work out their salvation with diligence". When he ends his work with the portentous phrase "It is finished" the

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overtones are wellnigh inescapable, and unsympathetic critics at the time were not slow to see the play as a more sophisticated reworking of the theme of Jerome K. Jerome's highly popular, if sentimental, drama *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* (1908) in which Christ is reincarnated as a guest in a twentieth-century boarding house.

This element I find the most difficult, in discussing both the story and the play, to keep in the right perspective. W. H. Auden, for example, says that "in his own discreet way, James is writing a religious parable".33 To this I am tempted to apply George Dane's words already quoted: "Ah, that, it seems to me, scarcely puts it". It is either less, or more, than a religious parable, and in restricting it thus Auden seems to me to make the same mistake that he reproaches Matthiessen for making: taking the story too literally. Yet even while Matthiessen is emphasising the secular materialism of the tale he does casually refer to it as "a fantasy of another world" and it is Matthiessen who usefully reminds us:

James' religion was phrased very accurately by Eliot as an 'indifference to religious dogma' along with an 'exceptional awareness of spiritual reality'. It is likely that a man of James' sensibility, if his mind had been formed in our age of crisis, would have felt, as Eliot has, the ineluctable necessity of religious order.34

We know that James's friend and contemporary, Henry Adams, did begin to feel that "ineluctable necessity of religious order", but, surprisingly for a Bostonian brought up in the Protestant tradition of Unitarianism, it was not in Protestantism that he sought that order. As early as 1853 the English art critic John Ruskin had tried, in Book II Chapter 6 of *The Stones of Venice*, to define "The Nature of Gothic" and described how his admiration for the architecture of the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe had led him to recognise religious principle as the motivating force behind the architects and the craftsmen who created these splendid soaring structures as an expression of the liberating sense of freedom their religion gave them. In Ruskin's words, Christianity had "recognized, in small things as well as in great, the individual value of every soul. But it not only recognizes its

value, it confesses its imperfection".\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Mont-St.-Michel and Chartres} shows us Henry Adams responding in a similar way to the glories of Chartres Cathedral, but where Ruskin’s allusion to Christianity conveniently avoids specifying the exact branch of Christianity that had created these masterpieces, Adams rigorously pushes his scholarship to the admission that it was Catholicism and in particular the cult of the Virgin that had been responsible for Chartres. In \textit{The Education of Henry Adams} he was to develop brilliantly the contrast between the force that the Virgin had represented for the thirteenth century and the patent lack of any such equivalent force in the nineteenth century: “All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres”.\textsuperscript{36}

There have always been suggestions that before his death in 1918 Adams was received into the Catholic church. His most authoritative biographer, Ernest Samuels, finds this unlikely, but there is no doubt that Adams was much attracted to the spirit, if not to the letter, of Catholicism. Crossing the Atlantic in 1892, he read Walter Pater’s novel \textit{Marius the Epicurean}, the account of how a Roman patrician had been led into the early church, not by dogma, but by his aesthetic sensibility. A similar aestheticism had led Pater himself and was to lead Adams towards the quietist consolation that the Virgin had always afforded to “lucky Catholics”. Adams approvingly quotes Pascal: “I have often said that all the troubles of man come from his not knowing how to sit still”.\textsuperscript{37} We have here an interesting anticipation of the concluding prayer of “Ash Wednesday”, where Eliot comes as near as he ever does to a concept of the Virgin as something more than a strictly Christian figure:

\begin{quote}
Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{36} Adams, \textit{Education}, p. 388.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 427.

How to sit still is also perhaps the most important lesson George Dane learns in the great good place.

Eliot's commitment to Anglo-Catholicism was common knowledge long before he wrote *The Cocktail Party*. In the closing act of that play we discover that Celia, on leaving the sanatorium, had joined a very austere nursing order and that this had led directly to her death as a martyr: her life was, we are assured, "triumphant".39 The introduction of this theme of saintliness and martyrdom, recalling as it inevitably must *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*, gives Celia a dramatic prominence and an aura of superiority over the other characters that I suspect is alien to Eliot's real intention. *The Cocktail Party* is not a religious play in the overt and successful way that *Murder in the Cathedral* is. Indeed, despite the features to which I have alluded, I would wish to argue that, like "The Great Good Place", it is not a narrowly religious parable either. In the second act Harcourt Reilly tells Celia that if she so wishes he can reconcile her to the human condition. When she asks "Is that the best life?" he replies

> It is a good life. Though you will not know how good
> Till you come to the end …
> In a world of lunacy,
> Violence, stupidity, greed … it is a good life.40

Celia will settle for nothing less than the best and she chooses the path that leads to her death. That death, I believe, is introduced into the play less to invest her with an odour of sanctity than for the effect that the news of it has on the other, more mundane, characters, and for the help it is to them in coming to understand themselves by coming to terms with Celia's fate. I do not intend to sound patronising when I suggest that, in his treatment of Edward and Lavinia, Eliot wishes to establish that we need not all aspire to martyrdom and that the lives of ordinary people are worth no less than those of the saints. His next two plays, *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman*, seek to reinforce the point but unfortunately with insufficient dramatic dynamism.

In 1921, Virginia Woolf, in a very perceptive study of "The Great Good Place", made a similar complaint about that story.

40 Ibid., p. 124.
Identifying the way in which, for Dane, "the inner life revives", she continues:

But directly the change is accomplished we are aware that something is wrong with the story. The movement flags; the emotion is monotonous... The story dwindles to a sweet soliloquy.41

The great good place and the sanatorium have a cramping rather than a liberating effect on the imaginations of James and Eliot as they try to make use of them, and their fables suffer as a result. As Mrs. Woolf says of the story, "We ought, we feel, to be inside, and we remain coldly outside. Something has failed to work".42 These are stories of faith-healing, but what has failed to work is the effective communication of the faith as a felt experience. Nor is the nature of the faith itself made clear enough to us. It has been argued before—indeed, it is implicit in Matthiessen’s comment on this tale—that James often relies too much on aesthetic sensibility and taste as a substitute for ethics.43 Another critic observes, with specific reference to this story:

As even the admirer of James would admit, there are places where one fears for the direction taken by his sensibility: places marked by a slightly flaccid religiosity and morbidity, an unclear and self-indulgent emotionality.44

If in a paper on James and Eliot I have spent so much time on Henry Adams it is because I see them as a kind of triangle, and because Adams, in the letter with which I started, voluntarily identifies himself with James as "improvised Europeans ... and Lord God, how thin". Fully to understand the reasons for Adams's disparaging diagnosis we need to read on in the same letter:


42 Ibid., p. 65.

43 See, for example, J.H. Raleigh, "Henry James: The Poetics of Empiricism", PMLA, lxvi (March 1951), 107-123.

The painful truth is that all of my New England generation ... were in actual fact only one mind and nature; the individual was a facet of Boston. We knew each other to the last nervous centre, and feared each other's knowledge. We looked through each other like microscopes. There was absolutely nothing in us that we did not understand merely by looking in the eye. There was hardly a difference even in depth, for Harvard College and Unitarianism kept us all shallow. We knew nothing—no! but really nothing! of the world ... Type bourgeois-bostonien! ... You cannot help smiling at them, but you smile at us all equally. God knows that we knew our want of knowledge! The self-distrust became introspection, nervous self-consciousness—irritable dislike of America and antipathy to Boston...45

This was, of course, a private letter and as such it remained unpublished until the 1930s. The Education of Henry Adams was published in 1918 and Eliot reviewed it for the Athenaeum. It was not a particularly sympathetic review, but it was an acute one. For Eliot, Adams was "little Paul Dombey asking questions", and he is concerned to stress the Bostonian parochialism of Adams—almost to overstress it:

He was much more refined than the equivalent Englishman, and had less vitality, though a remarkably restless curiosity, eager but unsensuous. And his very American curiosity was directed and misdirected by two New England characteristics: conscientiousness and scepticism ... Conscience made him aware that he had been imperfectly educated at Harvard and Berlin, and that there was a vague variety of things he ought to know about. He was also aware, as most Bostonians are, of the narrowness of the Bostonian horizon. But working against conscience was the Boston doubt: a scepticism which it is difficult to explain to those who are not born to it. This scepticism is a product, or a cause, or a concomitant of Unitarianism; it is not destructive, but it is dissolvent.46

It is interesting that Eliot, with no knowledge of Adams's letter to James, should pick on the same three restricting factors—Boston, Harvard, and Unitarianism—that Adams had already identified as differentiating the improvised European from the real thing. Eliot's poem "Gerontion", written about this time, reflects in direct quotation and indirectly too the impact on him of his

45 Letters of Henry Adams, ii. loc. cit.
46 The Athenaeum, 23 May 1919. This extract from the uncollected writings of T.S. Eliot is reprinted by permission of Mrs. Valerie Eliot and Faber and Faber Ltd. © Mrs. Valerie Eliot 1983.
reading of *The Education*; he might almost have identified himself with Adams's self-portrait in the way that Adams had recognised himself in James's portrait of Story. Indeed, in the review Eliot goes on to develop a spontaneous and stimulating comparison between Adams and James.

The "nervous self-consciousness" which Adams sees as characterising the *type bourgeois-Bostonien* can, under the more benign influence of Europe, blossom into a richer consciousness, and we have seen how much importance James attaches, in "The Great Good Place" and elsewhere, to "the blest fact of consciousness". It will not, however, for the improvised European, totally eliminate the nervous self-consciousness, as James had recognised wittily in *William Wetmore Story and his Friends*; when he speaks of Story's absolutely undiminished possession of the American consciousness. This property he carried about with him as the Mohammedan pilgrim carries his carpet for prayer, and the carpet, as I may say, was spread wherever the camp was pitched.

The consummation of becoming a European may well entail too high a price in agonising reappraisals of one's self, and it is relevant to recall how obsessed are all the characters in Eliot's plays with the search for identity, the discovery of what the self really is. So, too, was George Dane. The essential Americanness of this problem presented itself to James's imagination most sharply when he revisited his homeland and, as he records in *The American Scene*, was impressed with so strong a sense of dispossession, of not belonging, as to be "exasperated to envy ... of the luxury of some such close and sweet and whole national consciousness as that of the Switzer and the Scot". W. H. Auden's discussion of "The Great Good Place" occurs in the closing paragraph of the introduction he wrote for an edition of *The American Scene* published in 1946. There he suggests that the relevance of the story to the book is that nobody but an American can "understand by contrast the nature of the Good Place nor desire it with sufficient desperation to stand a chance of arriving".

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48 James, *William Wetmore Story*, i. 28.
49 James, *The American Scene*, p. 86.
50 Ibid., p. xxiii.
In the work of Adams, James and Eliot the quest for quietism in a European context does have overtones of desperation suggestive of the expatriate, the "improvised European", but patronisingly to over-emphasise this is to obscure the valuable moral thrust of that work. Eliot's plays, like James's best novels and _The Education of Henry Adams_ with its "very American curiosity", are based on the Socratic premise that the unexamined life is not worth living. Adams, despite his aspirations to the determinism of the scientific historian, is not totally out of sympathy with James and Eliot, who recognise, with a strictly qualified optimism, the ability of human beings to exercise conscious and responsible moral choice and to become aware of the complexities of their interactions on one another. In _The Portrait of a Lady_ James shows us, to put it crudely, the "bad" characters manipulating the good for their own ends and the "good" characters trying, with the best intentions but disastrous results, to create opportunities for each other to fulfil their potential. In "The Great Good Place" the opportunity that is created for George Dane is created less certainly by human agency and even, it is half-hinted, perhaps by some supra-human agency: the story is the weaker for this gratuitous ambiguity. In _The Cocktail Party_ I believe we are intended to see Alex, Julia and Harcourt Reilly, not as interfering in or controlling the lives of the others, but merely as guiding them to the point where they can perceive the moral issue in its simplest terms and then act—and _Nunc Age_ is the title of a chapter in _The Education_, even though Adams's "Boston doubt" touches it with a little irony. When the two men in "The Great Good Place" exchange the following observations they might be James and Eliot in an imaginary conversation agreeing on this moral theme:

"Isn't simplification the secret?"
"Yes, but applied with a tact!" (p. 257).

My complaint against the story and, to a lesser extent, against Eliot's later plays is that they would be better if they applied more tact and if they eschewed mystification in favour of the simplification they so earnestly desire. Adams, James and Eliot are all drawn constantly to the "interesting failure" as the subject of their speculation and analysis. It is perhaps in part the reaction of the "improvised European" against the "success ethic" of the American popular imagination, but it is that aspect of their expatriate personalities that brings them into this significant form of literary and cultural family reunion.