

Balzac:

Henry James's Visit to Indianapolis in 1905

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In his mature years, the noted novelist Henry James desired to visit his native United States. Having long before left America to reside in Great Britain and to write in a milieu of sophistication and culture, he yearned to see the land of his youth. He wanted to reminisce in the places where he had grown up, where his family had flourished, and where some had died and been buried. But James had a larger aim in mind. He also wanted to get a closer look at his homeland. He wanted to see if America had grown up. He wanted to discover if the passing years had brought on in Americans a greater sophistication and a greater realization of the need for cultural refinement and introspection.

So in August of 1904 Henry James recrossed the Atlantic Ocean to visit his homeland for the first time in twenty-one years. He was sixty years old, a successful novelist and travel writer, though not a wealthy one. He sailed to America with some trepidation. He feared what he would find in the New World. Had the Americans matured? Were they as coarse as they used to be? He arrived in New York and resorted to the New England towns and haunts of his youth, visiting with family and friends. He breathed the crisp air, gazed on the houses where he had grown up, and visited the graves of long-gone family.

While in America, James would make his visit a paying one. He had already contracted with English periodicals to write about it. In New York, he drafted a lecture and, employing his network of friends and literary acquaintances, set out to give his lecture across the whole of the

United States. He traveled to the South, the Midwest, and across the dusty deserts to California giving his lecture. He was well-paid for his efforts, often earning up to five-hundred dollars at each event.

During his travels, Henry James visited and spoke in Indianapolis to a joint audience of the Indianapolis Literary Club, the Contemporary Club, and the Irvington Athenaeum. His lecture merited front-page attention in some of Indianapolis's major daily newspapers and was, for some of the city's people, the talk of the town. But for others, the occasion was a non-event. As we will see, Indianapolis's elites turned out for the occasion, but the city's poor, dispossessed, and minorities paid it no mind. The division in the interest of the city's newspapers reflected that of the community.

Henry James was born in 1843 in New York City into a comfortably well-off family. He and his siblings, among them the famous philosopher and psychologist William James, were educated by private tutors as the family crossed and recrossed the Atlantic in the wake of their father, who roved the seas in search of theological insights. Entering Harvard Law School, Henry soon tired of studying law and gravitated to the writing life. He avoided out on service in the Civil War owing to a bad back and a general disinclination to serve. Encouraged by his friends, he pursued writing and traveled back and forth to Europe in search of experiences and ideas. Settling in England permanently in 1876, he churned out reviews, travel accounts, short stories, plays, and novels to growing acclaim in the English-speaking world. James never married, and invested his emotional energies in letter writing to family and friends. James's letters written during his 1904-1905 visit, and his subsequent account of the eastern part of the journey, published in 1907 as a book called *The American Scene*, afford us ample insights into his thoughts.

James's arrival in America in 1904 prompted clamorous newspaper reporters to dog his steps. He fought them off as well as he could. He received many invitations for dinners and banquets in his honor, which he begged off claiming a "constitutional infirmity" from "any sort of personal publicity."¹ The attention was unavoidable. He was a famous author in a country crowded with newspapers all vying for readers. Notwithstanding the annoyances, the writer planned no respite from work. During his visit his editors sent him proofs of his latest essays and novel, including *The Golden Bowl*. He also jotted down observations on the United States that he planned to write up for his London publishers. In short, it was a working visit, and in his letters he complained of having little time to think and observe.

Shortly after Henry James visited President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House in early January of 1905, he gave a lecture in Philadelphia to a rapturous audience on what he called, "The Lesson of Balzac." The talk was a hymn of praise for the French novelist Honoré de Balzac, whose sharp observations of French society in the 1830s and 40s James and other writers greatly admired. Having been deluged with requests to speak, James drafted the talk as a way to educate American tastes. Writing to his brother William, James described his Philadelphia date as "a complete success, a brilliant one, an easy one, with no flaw save the immense and *foreseen* [this fortnight, by *me*] OVERDONE-ness of the occasion; *five or six hundred* people in a hall stuffed to suffocation, tho' very large and with perfect audibility, and making for a 'literary address; an inevitably rather false and 'fashionable' *milieu*. But it went beautifully—and I revealed to myself a talent for lecturing."² What's more, he was paid. The money would go far to keep up his English house in the little Sussex port of Rye. A southern swing to Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida giving the lecture while visiting friends proved that the speakers' circuit was a paying thing. By February he was booked to speak from Boston

to Chicago to St. Louis to California, with Indianapolis in-between. Wherever he traveled to give his Balzac lecture, Henry James received intense comment in the American press.

Evidence suggests that Indianapolis native (and Literary Club member) Booth Tarkington was the person responsible for bringing James to town. Still a young writer, fresh from the success of his best-selling debut novel, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, at the time Tarkington resided in New York. Metropolitan newspapers were full of gossip surrounding his adventures in the big city, from news that his dog went missing or that he had lost his trousers, to the fact that the theatrical version of his bestseller flopped in Detroit. Tarkington and James met at an informal dinner in New York with fellow writers Mark Twain and Hamlin Garland present. It is probable the Indianapolis writer contacted his friends back home in Indiana to invite the visitor to lecture.

The *Indianapolis News*, a daily evening paper that billed itself as independent in politics but leaned to the Republican Party, championed the visit of James. Being the voice of the city's high-minded intellectuals, it loudly touted the event, having followed the writer's peregrinations in America. "Famous Novelist to be Guest of Indianapolis Literary Clubs," read the headline. The page sported a large lithograph portrait of James. The "distinguished writer and traveler" was to be the guest of three separate literary groups, the Contemporary Club, the Irvington Athenaeum, and our own Indianapolis Literary Club. The event would take place at the Propylaeum on Friday night, March 17. It was open only to the members of the three clubs. "Much interest" existed among James's "many admirers" in the city, it stated. Mr. James would lecture on "The Lesson of Balzac."³ The *News*'s outsized excitement at James's visit was due largely to the fact that Louis Howland, one of its prominent editors who would later be its long-

time editor-in-chief, was a former president of the Literary Club. Louis was the son and nephew respectively of John D. and Livingston Howland, founders of the Literary Club.

At that time, Irvington was the home of Butler College. The neighborhood had the reputation as a Bohemian enclave for the city's literati. Its Athenaeum, formed about 1900, ambitiously invited famous speakers from all over the country. The Contemporary Club, founded in 1890, had both men and women as members. James's lecture was a joint event of the three groups. The *Indianapolis Sun*, a daily paper with a working-class readership, made fun of the coming event:

The man behind whom all the others fall in, the real bell-sheep of the herd of society writers, is coming, and already classic Irvington is agog with expectation and the litterateurs are having their black trousers sharpened for the affair. He is coming. He is Henry James, who is the society writer who really belongs.⁴

As the day of the lecture approached, Indianapolis newspapers revealed their political/cultural slants through their coverage. At that time, Indianapolis boasted seven daily newspapers, two of them German-language papers, and at least five major weeklies. Three of the weeklies catered to the vibrant African-American community, one was a temperance mouthpiece, and one promoted organized labor in the city. Significantly, none of the weekly papers nor the German dailies commented on the James lecture, it clearly being the province of the white, educated, and patrician English-speaking elite of the city. Four of the five English-language dailies covered the event at least in passing, the fifth being the *Commercial-Reporter*, a business rag which ignored the event. Given the multiplicity of general-interest daily newspapers in a city of about one-hundred-seventy-thousand residents, an intense competition

for readers existed. As James's appearance in the city was practically the property of the *Indianapolis News*, the event was fair game for that paper's rivals.

A case in point was the coverage by the rival Republican paper. On Thursday morning, the day of James's planned arrival by train, the *Indianapolis Morning Star* editorialized snidely about how locals should comport themselves. Don't be too pushy with him, it advised. "By professing a close acquaintance with any particular work they are in danger of being suspected by him of having crammed for the occasion. Of course they have not. Of course the cultured and discriminating members of the [clubs] have been, so to speak, 'brought up' on James. He is with them a household word."⁵

The *Daily Sentinel*, the city's main Democratic paper, savaged James and his books in an editorial under the headline, "A Former American." Criticizing James's difficult prose and condemning his lapsed Americanness, the editorial writer noted finding James's unread books at the public library. They are good books for the library to own, he remarked, "since they suffer less from wear and tear and do not have to be sent so frequently to the binders for new covers." The writer opined that James's works left readers "in the air, and while he floats dizzily around [the reader] wonders what it is all about. The author's art is so subtle and elusive that one somehow seems to miss it altogether." Perhaps, the editorialist concluded, if James had stayed in the U.S. he would have turned out a better writer.⁶

Even the *News* got in a critical lick. On the evening of the lecture, the newspaper published a poem that pointed to the difficulty in reading James's dense prose:

Oh, clever Mr. Henry James,
Of rhetoric so acrobatic,
Of all the puzzles and the games,
I find yours the most ecstatic.

The most entrancing,
 Prancing,
 Glancing,
 Thought enhancing,
 Charm prismatic!

Perhaps I don't know what you mean,
 But I've a hunch that you mean something.
 Well hid behind a verbal sheen,
 That makes me seem to me a dumb thing.
 A very densely,
 Hencely,
 Whencely,
 Yet intensely
 Eager bum thing.

And so I read you in a trance.
 And e'er I'll toil and strive to read you,
 For psychological romance
 Is sure hot stuff, and sure we need you
 With urgent needing,
 Thought field seeding
 Mental speeding
 On to heed you!⁷

The *Sun*, the self-appointed voice of the proletarian masses, dismissed James's coming by commenting that the event was deliberately scheduled to occur on St. Patrick's Day. The city's Hibernian population would be too engrossed in the festivities to notice the "Henglish society man."⁸ Indeed, the newspaper ignored the lecture and instead published a minute account of the St. Patrick's Day parade.

James's arrival in the city on a 5pm train the day before the lecture merited much comment. At the station was Charles W. Moores Jr., a prominent attorney and president of the Contemporary Club, who was the son of Bobbs-Merrill publishing house founder, Charles W. Moores, Sr. Also at the station was Hewitt H. Howland, editor of a literary magazine called *The Reader*, and brother of Louis Howland. Both were members of the Literary Club. On his

arrival, the evening *News* noted that James voiced surprise at the young city's "skyscrapers," and that he was "better pleased" by the appearance of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, "which he looked at with great interest."⁹

The *News* noted James's "prosaic" appearance. The paper described him as looking like "a heavy manufacturer, a railroad president or a banker," quite unlike the flamboyant writer of the imagination. He has "a deep, bell-like voice, accompanied by a smile which has plenty of room for play over his broad and rosy countenance." He possesses a "decidedly English" accent.¹⁰

That night James dined at the University Club as the guest of a retinue of city thought leaders. The next morning the *Star* mocked the occasion under the headline: "Hoosier Literati Greet Hank James." The local men "feasted" on James's every word "until a late hour," it read. The paper listed the names of the diners, several of whom have given "brilliant club papers." No toasts were raised, "but the flow of wit was unrestrained." The *Star* writer noted that Hewitt Howland guarded the visitor from reporters, a swipe perhaps at the control over the event held by the *News*. Nonetheless, the *Star* reporter proudly reported that James found the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument "magnificent" and planned to study it during a walk on the Circle in the morning. Asked by the *News* to give his impressions of the United States, James noted the "enormous increase of material civilization," and said it was a "more interesting country to move about in."¹¹

That night James stayed at the University Club house. The morning of the lecture brought warm spring weather. James took the occasion to study the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in detail. As evening arrived, James again dined at the University Club with an assemblage of Indianapolis literary and business leaders. Along with host C.W. Moores and his

brother Merrill Moores were poet James Whitcomb Riley, novelist Meredith Nicholson, superintendent of public schools Calvin Kendall, attorney and civil service reformer Lucius Swift, president of Butler College Scot Butler, the Howland brothers, law partner of former president Benjamin Harrison John Elam, bookstore owner John Cleland (who one month before had given a paper to the Literary Club on “Balzac and the Human Comedy”), attorney John Judah, Butler English professor Will D. Howe, and the reverend Matthias L. Haines, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. Besides Riley and Nicholson, several of the men around the table had books to their names.

The dinner broke up and the audience gathered at the old Propylaeum, clutching tickets that allowed them entrance. C.W. Moores introduced the speaker “as the man Robert Louis Stevenson loved.”¹² This reference to the popular poet and adventure novelist was perhaps an effort to give James an endorsement by a famous author whom audience members had actually read. Henry James began his lecture, reading his text. The newspapers reported the event. The *Sentinel* dodged saying anything about what James said, merely recording the audience’s reactions. James was in a “peculiarly happy vein,” it remarked politely, “and he held the attention of his audience without interruption. At times ripples of applause would follow the recital of particularly effective parts of the narrative.” The lecture was an “ambitious” effort, which “taxed the mentalities of his hearers at times to follow the deductions of the reader.”¹³

The *News* reviewed James’s lecture in detail, publishing more than one reporters’ thoughts on it. One of them, perhaps the author of the mocking poem, was less than impressed, not hesitating to note that James’s reading was “monotonous” and usually “without color.” “It was a panorama of word pictures requiring an hour to unroll. Looking over his audience and realizing that he was in Indiana, he apparently assumed that all of the brilliant assemblage were

authors, novelists or shortly to become so.” However, another writer at the newspaper penned an editorial calling the lecture a “Fine Piece of Criticism.” James’s essay was interesting, “beautiful, and profound.” The novelist possessed a “critical mind” and was a great critic. “He showed soberness, reserve, great insight, and, of course, great knowledge of the art.” In the following week the *News* continued to editorialize on James’s visit, using it to ruminate on the literary craft and pontificate on the Great American Novel.¹⁴

The next day, Henry James boarded a train for Chicago whence he would embark on his trip to California to read his lecture. The following day, while in the Windy City, he wrote to an eastern friend recounting his recent visits to St. Louis, Chicago, and Indianapolis. He had been seventeen days in the “great Middle West” and was

“rather spent and weary, weary of motion and chatter, and oh, of such an unimagined dreariness of *ugliness* (on many, on *most* sides!) and of the perpetual effort of trying to ‘do justice’ to what one doesn’t like. If one could only damn it and have done with it! So much of it is rank with good intentions. And then the ‘kindness’—the princely (as it were) hospitality of these clubs; besides the sense of power, huge and augmenting, power, power (vast mechanical, industrial, social, financial) everywhere!”¹⁵

Undoubtedly Henry James was venting from being worn out from having to be polite to his hosts during his lecture tour. But he was sorely unhappy and unimpressed with the America that he saw during his visit. In his many letters and in his essays sent back to England, later assembled into book form, he lamented the material obsessions of Americans and their shallow cultural ambitions. As James scholar Robin Hoople writes of his visit, the erstwhile American was dismayed by the bourgeois attitudes and the “cultural void” of the Midwest.¹⁶ He had returned home to learn if his homeland had matured. But all he seemed to find was evidence of

wealth without refinement. Writing after his visit to St. Louis, James said America offered him affluence, “but I would rather starve at Lamb House, [his home in Rye] than abide here.”¹⁷ Ten years later, James finally became a British citizen during World War One as a way to show his allegiance to his real homeland.

While Henry James turned his back on America, Americans did not do likewise. Indeed, American readers bought James’s books. During his visit in 1904-1905, he voiced surprise at the good sales of his latest novel, *The Golden Bowl*. The publicity surrounding his return evidently helped sales. But while Americans bought his novels, they did not necessarily read them. A recent study of the reading habits of patrons of the Muncie, Indiana public library at the turn of the twentieth century shows that citizens often checked out James’s novels. However, they returned them very promptly, far too quickly to have read them through. In other words, Americans in “Middletown” tried Henry James and found him wanting.¹⁸ As the *Indianapolis Sentinel* writer had sneered, James’s books rested on the bookshelves unmolested by readers. And as the *Star* editorial writer also noted, let’s not fool ourselves into thinking we’ve read Henry James.

James’s dense prose is the problem. Wading through his long, rambling sentences is a trying chore. The reward seems not worth the effort. In a recent essay in *The New Yorker*, literary critic Adam Gopnik chides the writer’s “wilderness of parentheses.” “James’s language,” he writes, is like “a kind of circular earthwork,” blocking access to the idea at its center from all inroads. Wading through the river of words is taxing. Still, he says, the novelist’s great powers of observation of humanity are useful.¹⁹

I have a confession. I have tried and failed to read some of Henry James’s novels. Each time I start one of them I put it down after a few chapters, unfinished. My failure consigns me to

the ranks of the bourgeois masses that James so decried, I suppose. I'm like those Muncie library readers who checked out James but returned him after just a few pages. I suppose it's because I'm thoroughly provincial: born in Chicago, I've lived my whole life in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. I lack the culture, the sensitivity, the worldliness that perhaps is required to read James. I'll keep trying, however. But not right away.

Henry James's visit to Indianapolis caused a minor but passing sensation here, creating a ripple of comment that soon faded away. I don't think that it had a significant impact on the cultural life of our city. The newspapers turned their attention to other pressing matters, such as the war between Japan and Russia, the start of the baseball season, and whether living in high-rise apartments made people suicidal. I dare say the *Star* reporter was right to doubt that many members of the audience in the old Propylaeum had read his works. Did some turn to his novels afterwards? Perhaps. Let's hope so. But a look at the Club's *Summarized Record* for subsequent years fails to find mention of essays on James's art. I suspect the gentlemen of this Club and Mr. James simply did not click. James did not enjoy his visit to Indianapolis, and perhaps Indianapolis people felt no fondness for him, though were too polite to say so. Maybe as I mature I'll develop the patience and powers of concentration required to fathom James's language. I take solace that I'm no shallower than Club members were over one hundred years ago.

¹ Henry James to George Harvey, October 21, 1904, in Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James Letters*, Volume IV (1895-1916), (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1984), 326.

² Henry James to William James, January 10, 1905, *Henry James Letters*, vol. IV, 336.

³ *Indianapolis Daily News*, March 11, 1905.

⁴ *Indianapolis Daily Sun*, March 11, 1905.

⁵ *Indianapolis Morning Star*, March 16, 1905.

⁶ *Indianapolis Daily Sentinel*, March 17, 1905.

⁷ *Indianapolis Daily News*, March 17, 1905.

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- ⁸ *Indianapolis Daily Sun*, March 11, 1905.
- ⁹ *Indianapolis Daily News*, March 17, 1905.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, March 16, 1905.
- ¹¹ *Indianapolis Morning Star* and *Indianapolis Daily News*, both March 17, 1905.
- ¹² *Indianapolis Daily News*. March 18, 1905.
- ¹³ *Indianapolis Daily Sentinel*, March 18, 1905.
- ¹⁴ *Indianapolis Daily News*, March 18 and 25, 1905.
- ¹⁵ Henry James to Edward Warren, March 19, 1905, *Henry James Letters*, vol. IV, 355-356.
- ¹⁶ Robin Hoople, *Inexorable Yankeehood: Henry James Rediscovered America, 1904-1905* (Lewisburg, Penn: Bucknell University Press, 2009), 150.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 131-132.
- ¹⁸ Charles Johanningsmeier, "Henry James and American Public Libraries," *The Henry James Review* 36, number 1 (Winter 2015), 45-63.
- ¹⁹ Adam Gopnik, "Little Henry, Happy at Last," *The New Yorker* (January 18, 2016), 76.