A Continent of Pictures: Reflections on the “Europe” of Nineteenth-Century Tourists

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OBSERVING THE frustration of a tourist’s anticipations can help us grasp the basis of their fulfillment. In the early 1820s, a disappointed William Hazlitt found Rome to consist mainly of “a mass of tawdry, fulsome common-places,” such as “an almost uninterrupted succession of narrow, vulgar-looking streets [filled] with the dingy, melancholy flat fronts of modern-built brick houses.” What, he asked, had “a green-grocer’s stall, a stupid English china warehouse, a putrid trattoria, a barber’s sign, an old clothes or old picture shop or a Gothic palace, with two or three lacqueys in modern livery lounging at the gate, to do with ancient Rome?” (279–80). Twenty years later, Frances Trollope arrived in Florence, dreaming of “enter[ing] bodily into the presence of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, . . . the great Cosmo . . . and Lorenzo,” only to discover that Florence’s “great historic features were merged in the ordinary appearances, common to all cities of the earth”; her “poetical reminiscences gave way before the confusion of butchers’ stalls, grocers’ shops, pedlars’ booths, and the busy, and not very picturesque-looking population which was basking among them” (1: 94–95). A quarter century later, Henry James disliked Darmstadt for “reminding [the visitor] of the most sordid, the most squalid prose he knows—the corner-groceries and the region of the docks in his native metropolis” (Transatlantic 373). Passages like these are plentiful in the British and American travel literature of the nineteenth century.

What were these travelers seeking, that such mundane presences as “butchers’ stalls, grocers’ shops, [and] pedlars’ booths” should so discomfit them? I want to look beyond differences in specific ideals (antiquity for Hazlitt, Renaissance for Trollope) to consider the desideratum these passages clearly share, namely, alterity as such. This goal is apt to seem perfectly natural for travelers—who goes abroad to encounter what is near at hand? Unless the ordinary shops, eating
establishments, warehouses, dockyards, custom-houses, railway stations, and other indications of an ongoing quotidian life hold special attraction as local color, they are anathema, both to the recorded impressions of visitors and to the tourists’ guidebooks that since the rise of the Murrays and Baedekers in the middle 1800s have pointed the way. Along with the drabber aspects of transport and lodgings, these sights are the “prose” of the tour. Tourists abroad have seldom been prepared to consider how the foreigners among whom they move carry on any of those unspectacular commerces that have nothing to do with the visitor’s witnessing.

For visitors or prospective visitors to Europe, it was preeminently the works of John Murray III and of Karl Baedeker and sons that naturalized the separation of tourist attractions (“Culture”) from mundane continuous life (anthropological “culture”). Starting from the 1820s and 1830s, the publishing houses of Murray and Baedeker established what was widely recognized as a wholly new form and an unprecedented authority in guidebooks. The authors brought an inspired diligence and thoroughness to their work, taking a hitherto unimaginable degree of responsibility for the information they conveyed and earning reputations of infallibility for their labors. Soon after publication of the first Murray handbooks, the narrator of Charles Lever’s 1844 picaresque Arthur O’Leary: His Wanderings and Ponderings in Many Lands was demanding to know, “in sober seriousness, what literary fame equals John Murray’s?” Lever’s character could not “conceive anything more frightful than the sudden appearance of a work which should contradict everything in the Handbook, and convince English-people that John Murray was wrong . . . ,” and he doubted that the English could bear the shock of finding “that the ‘Continent’ was no longer the Continent as we have been accustomed to believe it” (46).

In shaping this “Continent,” Murray worked according to a distinct ethnographic principle. The preface to his 1836 Handbook for Travellers on the Continent faulted previous guidebooks mainly for their lack of discrimination about “what is peculiar to a place, and what is not worth seeing, or may be seen equally well or to a greater advantage somewhere else” (v). Murray resolved to avoid “the ordinary practice of local Guide-Books, which . . . cram in everything that can possibly be said”; he would “point out things peculiar to the spot, or which might be better seen there than elsewhere.” Unlike his prolix and slipshod precursors, Murray strove “to consult the wants and convenience of travellers in the arrangement of [his] facts” and to produce a version of places that expressly served the needs of visitors—a version that identified the place with features special to it, not those shared with other habitations (“Origin” 624–25). This was “the Continent as we have been accustomed to believe it” of which Lever’s narrator spoke: a tourist’s Continent where the “peculiar” reigns. Distinctively Parisian features would be found in the Paris or France handbook; that which is special to southern Germany would fill the pages of Southern Germany; only truly “Continental” matters would be taken up in the Handbook for Travellers on the Continent. Of course, because tourists have to rest and eat and change money and hire ciceroni and occasionally wash their clothes or consult physicians—and they might prefer arrangements approximating those at home—Murray included much reliable information pertaining to such concerns. But these prosaic issues, relegated to introductory sections of volume or chapter, are not permitted to mingle or interfere with the guidebook’s central function of putting the reader in front of Europe’s “poetic,” its “European,” features. These elements make “Europe” what it authentically is; they make “Europe” worth seeing. In Murray’s presentation, things European are becoming signs of themselves. On the tourist’s Continent, “the authentic [or peculiar] is a usage perceived as a sign of that usage, and tourism is in large measure a quest for such signs” (Culler 159).

A framework of assumptions structuring many British and American travelers’ views of their own societies gave the quest for signs of alterity and authenticity a more specific definition. Built by the Romantic response to industrialization and capitalist expansion, this framework sustained an image of life on the home front as a prevailingly utilitarian enterprise. “Life in England,” Leslie Stephen wrote in 1869, “is a dreary vista of mo-
notonous toil. . . . To live without work is not
supposed to enter into our conceptions" (168).
English people, Stephen thought, had lost the ca-
pacity for enjoyment, in the deepest sense of the
word. Ten years later, Henry James was arguing
that Americans, because of their society’s long
focus on material growth and production, had
never even learned that capacity. In Hawthorne,
James maintains that, in the antebellum era,
“American life had begun to constitute itself from
the foundations; it had begun to be, simply; it
was at an immeasurable distance from having
gone to enjoy” (341). To tourists backed by
these common perceptions, the ordinary making
and trading occurring in Europe’s tourist capitals
was thus an unwelcome reminder of the methods
and exigencies shaping social life in their own
nations.

Throughout the century, a frequent defense of
the Continental tour claimed that, like “culture”
as the critics of utilitarianism described it, foreign
tavel readmits into human life the imaginative
and moral energies—the poetry—sacrificed in a
Benthamite workaday world. Mill detected in
Wordsworth’s poems “the very culture of the
feelings, which [he] was in quest of” (89); the
nineteenth-century Continental tour literalized
his “quest.” Samuel Rogers’s Italy (1822) mounts
the Wordsworthian argument that all travelers to
Europe are ultimately “on the same errand” of
seeking to recover that joyous sense of life which
their routine existence has nearly extinguished.
“Travel, and foreign travel more particularly,”
Rogers avers, “restores to us in a great degree
what we have lost. . . . All is new and strange.
We surrender ourselves, and feel once again as
children” (171). Such rhetoric prepared a foun-
dation for later efforts that construe even the brisk
and businesslike package tour as an ameliorative
vacation for those who work for a living. Ac-
cording to one 1864 assessment, Thomas Cook’s
excursions served humankind by taking the
“hard-working man, labouring in one spot for
fifty weeks in the year [to] some place as far away
from and as different to his ordinary abode as
lies within the reach of his purse . . .” (qtd. in
Rae 69). The alterity travelers looked for on the
tour thus became “authentic” in another sense
than that implied by Murray’s “peculiar fea-
tures.” Insofar as domestic society appeared to
stultify feelings and imagination, touring seemed
to offer opportunities for the exercise of thwarted
human potential, and tourists and their guides
could represent as “authentically other” the ex-
periences that provided such opportunities. 1

Nineteenth-century European travel thus af-

dors a clear enactment of the culture-and-society
dichotomy traced by Raymond Williams, ac-
cording to which the effects of modern social life’s
remorseless mechanisms are tempered, and the
sacrifices they entail recompensed, through cul-
ture. Physical departure from one’s busily mod-
erning society could take on the ideological
appeal of a temporary, revivifying departure from
compromised social existence. Invested with
pent-up psychic energy, that which lay across any
appreciable boundary (Atlantic, Channel, Alps)
could be shaped into a vessel for deferred wishes. 2
Britons constructed the “Continent” in this way,
Americans a larger “Europe” that included Great
Britain. To be sure, each of these objectified forms
was molded by distinctive British and American
conditions, but both put a premium on features
and places that appeared proof against modern
economic pursuits and the liberalizing tendencies
associated with them. Britons and Americans
agreed that Italy possessed the greatest concen-
tration of the valuably different in Europe, the
greatest density of Europeanness, as long as that
nation seemed exempt from modernity, un-
touched by industry, nationalism, political de-


cracy, and secularism. For British and
American visitors, the southward crossing of the
Alps figured as an entrance into the inner sanc-
tum of European otherness. But the general
framework of the gaze made virtually every place
“on the Continent” or “in Europe” describable
in terms of its opposition to the modern and fa-
miliar (see Urry 1–3). Even an up-to-date capital
like Paris could be seen as a visionary precinct
untainted by the commercial and quotidian.
Looking at the Parisian vista, Hazlitt remarks that

the view of London is more open and extensive; it
lies lower, and stretches out in a lengthened line of
dusky magnificence. After all, it is an ordinary town,
a place of trade and business. Paris is a splendid
vision. . . . The stately, old-fashioned shapes and
Hazlitt's passage sets forth an implicit argument: London, "an ordinary town, a place of trade and business," has a low and simple skyline; Paris, with its splendid and variegated skyline, must therefore be anything but a typical commercial town.

In time, such reciprocal definition became sufficiently common to make the wishful gaze at the "authentic and different" a generic principle of much travel writing and experience focused on "Europe"—an authenticity effect, so to speak. The effect has several notable motifs, of which I would mention stillness, which applies to a profoundly satisfying lack of interruption or distraction in the traveler's contact with scenes bearing a particular historical or emotional charge; the dreamlike, which refers to situations felt to be so extremely foreign to modern quotidian life that they seem unreal; and saturation, which names the quality some sites appear to possess of being so drenched in significance that "every step" is full of meaning or power (Buzard 177). Chief among the authenticity effect's motifs, and often embracing the others, is the picturesque, which by the 1820s had worked its way beyond the landscape studies of its eighteenth-century origins and into the wider world of cities and their inhabitants. When Hazlitt stands back to look at Paris as a picture—noting its "shapes," "angles," "texture," and "colour"—he attempts to grasp the quality that makes Paris, by contrast with London, what it is: not only a great vessel for art but a work of pictorial art in its own right. In similar fashion, Frances Trollope thought that her essential and anticipated Florence was delivered to her not when she traveled the city streets (with their butchers' stalls and other unpicturesque "contemporanea") but when she looked down on the red tile roofs and the duomo from Fiesole. "Now it was that I saw Florence!" she writes. "Dante's Florence . . . Galileo's Florence . . . Michael Angelo's Florence. . . . The Florence of cinquecento glory, and the museum of cinquecento art!" (1: 147). The authenticity effect occurs in the epiphanic moment when the unified aesthetic essence of the place shines forth; it supplies what the narrator of James's "Passionate Pilgrim" calls the "rare emotion, familiar to every intelligent traveller, in which the mind, with a great passionate throb, achieves a magical synthesis of its impressions." In these moods, "you feel England; you feel Italy" (Complete Tales 2: 240). Coleridge had given travelers a maxim on picturesqueness: one may find it "where parts only are seen and distinguished, but the whole is felt" (qtd. in Price 280). Indeed, for tourists, the picturesque vision is a Coleridgean symbol, shot through with the essence of the whole for which it stands.

To regard the picturesque in this way is to recognize nineteenth-century tourism as a point of contact between Romanticism's symbolist aesthetics, on the one hand, and the emerging sciences of human society, on the other—the latter taking as a basic premise the "presumption that [the] array of disparate-seeming elements of social life composes a significant whole, each factor of which is in some sense a corollary of, consubstantial with, implied by, immanent in, all the others." This presumption forms the root of the "culture idea" recently studied by Christopher Herbert: that principle which "renders the various elements of a way of life systematically readable just as the notion of organic unity in literary texts rendered them readable according to the norms of the discipline of 'new criticism.' " (5). Travelers and early ethnographers of the first half of the nineteenth century set forth a vision of "culture" avant la lettre as a bounded and integrated symbolic system: in the 1830s, Harriet Martineau, both travel writer and ethnographer (the roles overlapped at this stage; see Porter 246–84 and Pratt), urged the attentive student of social life that "everything he looks upon will instruct him," that every item "from an aqueduct to a punch-bowl" was replete with symbolic significance (qtd. in Herbert 263). It was not until Durkheim, at the start of the twentieth century, that assumptions like Martineau's were yoked in the service of a rigorous, "full-blown semiological theory of culture" (Herbert 263). But tourists and travel writers helped sustain these assumptions, in untheorized form, for decades. Thus, in the popular
1826 Diary of an Ennuyée, Anna Jameson admits that her effusive account of the Roman Forum sounds “very sentimental, and picturesque, and poetical,” but she insists that “such is the place, the scenery, the people. Every group is a picture, the commonest object has some interest attached to it, the commonest action is dignified by sentiment, the language around us is music, and the air we breathe is poetry” (173). The motif of saturation is here in Jameson’s “every group,” “the commonest object,” “the commonest action”; no unseemly element disrupts the shimmering pictorial grace of the moment. Each impression gathered on a tour could be seen as symbolic, and all the impressions “magically synthesized,” insofar as visitors ascribed to the visited place an underlying “expressive totality,” each part being “pars totalis, immediately expressing the whole” (Althusser and Balibar 17).

An emphasis on culture as, in Raymond Williams’s terms, “a whole way of life” is now generally assumed to distance culture from its narrower, primarily aesthetic, applications (Culture 232–42; Keywords 80). But the evidence supplied by the nineteenth-century picturesque tour helps illuminate the strong aesthetic appeal of the wholeness ethnographers attributed to the cultures they studied and tourists ascribed to the ones they visited. For modern societies intellectually and emotionally aware of themselves as anomic and fragmented, the wholeness of “a whole way of life” could not but acquire a powerful positive charge. Edward Sapir’s “Culture, Genuine and Spurious” (1924) is a classic formulation of the countermodern ideal common to picturesque tourists and ethnologists: Sapir’s genuine culture is “inherently harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory,” a unity “in which nothing is spiritually meaningless”; it is comparable to “a sturdy plant growth, each remotest leaf and twig of which is organically fed by the sap at the core”; it is not “a spiritual hybrid of contradictory patches” such as could be found “in our American life of today [the 1920s]” (90–93). The affinity between Sapir’s (and many another ethnologist’s) organicist model of culture and the aesthetic holism descending from German Romanticism through Coleridge and extending on into the New Criticism will be evident. With reference to “primitive” and remote societies, anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict made canonical the presumption of unmodern harmony and integration that had been the nostalgic core of tourists’ responses to their “Europe.”

In expressing a now common skepticism about the totalities classical ethnography purported to reveal, Herbert argues that the apparent “seamless unity of the discourse” of a writer like Benedict “vouches for the unity of the integrated cultural configuration it claims to represent” (7). Certain aspects of the picturesque tradition also suggest that the value-laden impression of wholeness may be an effect of style, the product of a structured and structuring gaze. For the founders of the tradition, picturesque seeing amounted to an art of vision, capable of correcting and completing what the landscape held forth. “Nature,” writes William Gilpin, “is always great in design; but unequal in composition. She is an admirable colourist; and can harmonize her tints with infinite variety, and inimitable beauty; but is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce an harmonious whole” (18). Although Gilpin does not specifically recommend it, many of his followers made use of the “Claude glass” to frame and color the scenes before them—or, rather, behind them, since the glass was a tinted mirror reflecting a painterly version of the landscape that lay over the carrier’s shoulder. Picturesque seeing yielded not only a scene that “looked like” a painting but a scene, balanced and complete; for picturesque tourists, the whole they earnestly sought relied on a distinct slant of vision and some measure of strategic omission. Everyday features of the visited place (populations included) either fell cleanly away from view or arranged themselves as part of the spectacle. In aestheticizing passages such as the one quoted above from Jameson’s Diary, travelers approached what Dolf Sternberger calls the “panorama of the nineteenth century,” that form of perception in which views have “lost their depth, becoming part and parcel of the same panorama world surrounding them and constituting a painted surface everywhere” (46; see Schivelbusch 52–69). The panoramic-picturesque flattened objects out, stretching them onto an
immeasurable unrolling canvas or dividing them into a series of images flashed before the viewer—much as one might see objects from a carriage or railway window. When Dickens, in the book he called *Pictures from Italy*, complained that the French towns he passed seemed to contain nothing but the same “standard objects, repeated over and over again,” he was hoping for an engaging spectacle of “France” that would be visible in transit, not thinking about each town’s separate need for those same prosaic objects—warehouses, stables, marketplaces, and so forth (5).

The gradual improvements in standard of living, the mundane political struggles, the ordinary commerce, and all the many other unpicturesque pursuits were what travelers sought to elide from the views they savored, though their success in this endeavor was, as my opening quotations indicate, partial at best. An uncomfortable sense of the limitations and distortions imposed by a touristic focus on Europe made itself felt in a variety of ways, sometimes in comic contexts. In Charles Lever’s 1854 novel *The Dodd Family Abroad*, the protagonist declares Murray’s handbooks to be “the most pernicious reading of the day” because Murray had “got up a kind of Pictorial Europe of his own, [filled] with bits of antiquarianism, history, poetry, and architecture,” the main function of which was “to convince our vulgar, vagabondizing English that they are doing a refined thing in coming abroad!” (14:108). Lever was not fooled, nor were others. To what extent were travelers really “abroad”—out in the world, open to events and contingencies—when their tours amounted to an array of pictures, before which they stood appreciative but detached? Toward the end of the century, W. H. Mallock lambasted the excursionist who followed Cook and Murray as one who “can hardly be said [to have] ever left home at all. He has virtually sat still and looked at a moving peep-show” (3). *Punch* had memorably enshrined this conceit in 1848 by recommending that tourists, prohibited by that summer’s uprisings from visiting their favorite Continental haunts, accept the reasonable facsimile of their picturesque sight-seeing afforded by that “eligible combination of climes and countries,” the Regent’s Park diorama, which might give them “all [the] life-like representations of cathedrals and mountains, by daylight, sunlight, moonlight, twilight, or any other light, that a dozen gas burners and ten gauze mediums can be made to produce” (“Cheap Tours”).

Writing amid the post-Napoleonic “crush” of British travelers abroad and reflecting a common anxiety over the fate of Europe’s traditions and attractions in the face of a second (touristic) British “invasion,” Anna Jameson admitted that “civilization, cleanliness, and comfort” are “excellent things” but added that “they are sworn enemies to the picturesque: they have banished it gradually from our towns, and habitations, into remote countries, and little nooks and corners, where we are obliged to hunt after it to find it; [whereas] in Italy the picturesque is everywhere . . .” (321). A century later, Edward Sapir was stating—as cultural theory—that

\[\text{[i]t is excellent to keep one's hands spotlessly clean, to eliminate smallpox, to administer anesthetics. Our growing sophistication, our ever increasing solicitude to obey the dictates of common sense, make these tendencies imperative. It would be sheer obscurantism to stay their progress. But there can be no stranger illusion . . . than this, that because the tools of life are today more specialized and more refined than ever before, . . . it necessarily follows that we are . . . attaining to a profounder harmony of life, to a deeper and more satisfying culture. (94)\]

Such texts mark a century of development between picturesque tourism and a consolidating modern ethnology devoted to comprehending the “well-rounded” character of life in “aboriginal civilization,” to appreciating “the firmness with which every part of that life—economic, social, religious, aesthetic—is bound together into a significant whole . . .” (Sapir 96). At the midpoint in that century, writing letters and essays home from Europe, is the young Henry James. His early travel texts both express and question the assumptions surrounding the time-honored convention of picturesqueness, giving evidence of the “self-divided forms” in which “the culture idea . . . articulates itself in the nineteenth century” (Herbert 302). Those texts exhibit the principle shared by countless nineteenth-century travelers: that the most satisfying Continental places yield, to the right perceiver, the picturesque made real.
“Had I never visited Italy,” Jameson writes, “I think I should never have understood the word picturesque” (321). Excitedly responding to his first day in Rome in 1869, James avows, “[F]or the first time I know what the picturesque is” (Letters 1: 160). But as a novice of the form, James also found himself repeatedly confronting some of its long-deferred internal strains; and he grasped, and harbored in his own texts, the critic’s or satirist’s suspicion that picturesqueness had the effect of turning a real Continent into mere pictures.

“If the picturesque were banished from the face of the earth,” James speculates in 1873, “I think the idea would survive in some typical American heart . . .” (Transatlantic 232). Hailing from the nation perhaps most devoted to the virtues of thrift and industry, novelty and democracy, the “typical American” James envisions offers nonetheless the greatest reverence and most steadfast guardianship for pictorial Europe. James’s American scene of the 1860s and 1870s is the one described by Hawthorne’s preface to The Marble Faun. The work’s Italian setting, Hawthorne writes, “afford[s] a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon as they are, and must needs be, in America,” a country containing “no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight” (854). For many Americans, the totality “Europe” could inspire the same intimations of authenticity and alterity that arose for Britons from contemplation of the “Continent” or discrete parts thereof. Facets of the developing tourist industry lent credence to this objectification, as they still do. From the time of George Putnam’s pioneering 1838 The Tourist in Europe to Arthur Frommer’s Europe on Five Dollars a Day and beyond, Americans have had access to guides that effectively reinforce the reified unity of “Europe” and put the key to that unity in the carrier’s hand—or on American shelves and coffee tables. During James’s apprenticeship in Europe, Bayard Taylor was compiling the deluxe three-volume Picturesque Europe: A Delineation by Pen and Pencil of the Natural Features and Picturesque and Historical Places of Great Britain and the Continent (published 1875–79), a daunting set of tomes that seems to imply not only “here is Europe in its picturesque aspect” but also “here is Europe, picturesque to the last detail.”

In the first volume of his autobiography, James would remember a “crucial” and “supremely determinant” hour during which, as a boy with his family on the Continent, he received an “ecstatic vision” of “Europe.” The family carriage halting at “a village on the way from Lyons to Geneva,” James looked out the window and saw “a castle and a ruin,” along with “the first peasant [he] had ever beheld, or beheld at least to such advantage.” The combination and arrangement of these elements elicited a powerful response: “Supremely, in that ecstatic vision, was ‘Europe,’ sublime synthesis, expressed and guaranteed to me . . .” (Autobiography 159–61). Sublime synthesis entails a successful matching of images stored in the memory (from reading, listening to travelers’ tales, viewing paintings and sketches, and otherwise preparing oneself) with scenes as they are encountered. The “original” becomes itself when the viewer perceives that it suits its representations (see MacCannell 48). But this conclusion attributes a particular importance to the viewer’s role in making the original become what it (potentially) is. The site can attain its full aesthetic value and realize its essence only when it comes within the purview of the properly appreciative witness. James’s revelation suggests that this richly non-American “Europe,” with its feudal remnants and hoary traditions, exists to be looked at by an American like James.

In the nearly four dozen essays collected in Transatlantic Sketches and Portraits of Places, “Europe” hovers before the young James as a “poetic or fairy precinct” in which life, properly organized, gracefully tends toward a succession of lovely, poignant, or sublime pictures. A cursory glance at these pieces indicates James’s addiction to the word picturesque and its antiutilitarian and antimodern associations. But James’s texts, for all their diligent pictorialism, register numerous conflicts in perspective, rifts between a “touristic” viewpoint giving priority to aesthetic appearance and an “engaged” viewpoint emphasizing local, pragmatic interests. The former perspective presupposes a detached observer who takes in the
look of a total scene; the latter posits the inside view of an indigene. The opening entry in *Transatlantic Sketches*, recounting a visit to the English walled city of Chester, exemplifies the tension. Conscious of his position as an American writing for his compatriots, James consistently stresses the meaningfully different and picturesque. The essay collection opens in Chester because the town, lying near the port of Liverpool, was the first bona fide European attraction Americans were likely to encounter on one established route. “So rare and complete a specimen of an antique town,” situated “so close to the threshold of England,” James’s Chester is a synecdoche for the entire, much anticipated continent, a whole pictorial Europe in miniature. “The American traveller, arriving at this venerable town,” James remarks, “finds himself transposed, without a sensible gradation, from the edge of the New World to the very heart of the Old” (*Transatlantic* 7).

The celebrated Cestrian wall commands attention at once. The very thought of a walled city excites the American imagination, but James has no interest in archaeological detail or medieval martial fantasies. After reluctantly adverting to archaeology (“The great fact, I suppose, is that [the wall] contains a Roman substructure”), he soon focuses on his true concern, which is simply the “charming” look of these “gentlest and least offensive of ramparts.” When the fortification is examined in this way, with its “earthy deposit of time” and its “rugged, ivy-smothered tower” affording just the right touches of color, it exhibits a “mild innocence,” as if consenting to James’s appropriation of it as an object of sight-seeing (*Transatlantic* 9). The site is “saturated,” primarily with opportunities for fine views:

> Every few steps as you go you see some little court or alley boring toward it through the close-pressed houses. It is full of that delightful element of the crooked, the accidental, the unforeseen, which, to American eyes, accustomed to our eternal straight lines and right angles, is the striking feature of European street scenery. (*Transatlantic* 9-10)

The emphasis on “straight lines and right angles” identifies the home country as paradigmatically the place of utilitarian order; in America, the eye takes the shortest route between two points. For a change from a diet of wide, clean streets with regularly spaced “brown-stone fronts,” the American in Europe will seek (and discover in Chester) “a perfect feast of crookedness” and “odd domestic interspaces.”

Yet, paradoxically, the crooked and accidental appearance yields a total impression that the town’s “*mise en scène*” has been artfully planned to please the tourist with its “cunning chiaroscuro.” This tiny oscillation between images of casual irregularity and artifice is the instance of tension I want to isolate. On the one hand is the projection of a nonutilitarian, traditional culture of “crookedness”; on the other, the fantasy that the European place is a theater set or painting, created expressly to satisfy the American appetite. James is both attracted and repelled by aspects of each of these possibilities. Artifice commends itself insofar as it seems to require the approbation of the observer; then again, its artistic and theatrical associations may savor too much of illusion to be palatable to travelers who want the “authentic” Europe, not some touristy distillation. The projection of a self-addressed traditional culture gives rise to a complementary problem. It conjures up an attractive image of life in Chester as rich in variety and nuance, grounded in a charmingly adventitious past rather than in cold calculations on utility. Drawn both ways, James writes that a ramble around Chester can inspire “the reflection—a superficial and fallacious one, perhaps—that amid all this cunning chiaroscuro of its *mise en scène*, life must have more of a certain homely entertainment” (*Transatlantic* 10). The radical note of self-interruption indicates James’s hedging of each opposing view. To the extent that James indulges in the notion of a self-bounded picture of the foreign, he and other American tourists bear only superficial relation to that picture; the Cestrian panorama continues heedless of their praise or presence.

James tries to overcome the suspicion that he is irrelevant to the scenes before him by making his tourist’s consciousness indispensable to the spectacle of Cestrian life. The Chester essay concludes in church, where James hears a rather poor sermon by Charles Kingsley but relishes the Anglican service’s “magnificent intonations and ca-
dences” and the cathedral’s fitness as a setting. The American visitor scans the total picture, lighting on a few constituent pleasures—“the vast oaken architecture of the stalls,” “the beautiful voices of certain officiating canons,” “the little rosy ‘king’s scholars’ sitting beneath the pulpit”—and decides that “every element in the scene [gives] it a great spectacular beauty” (Transatlantic 17). What place is there in this panoply of sensations for James himself? The last two pages of the essay suggest the vital contribution the tourist can make. The cathedral stands “modestly . . . on the roll of English abbeys,” is “of moderate dimensions and rather meagre in form and ornament,” he writes; “but to an American it is a genuine cathedral, and awakens all the proper emotions.” “Proper” here may mean both the emotions proper to a tourist’s appreciation of the church and the response that it properly deserves from its users. The Cestrians use, but do not make best use of, their church: they do not live up to the standard of order, beauty, and picturesque set for them by their traditions and monuments. Kingsley’s oratory exemplifies this shortcoming: “the sermon . . . should have been of as fine a quality as the church. It was not. . .” James turns this disappointment into a consolation and an encouragement for the appreciative American, who is “not incapable of taking a secret satisfaction in an incongruity of this kind” (Transatlantic 16, 18). After seeing the pomp and enchantment of the procession lead only to a banal discourse from the pulpit, “our poor sentimental tourist begins to hold up his head again, and to reflect with complacency that opportunity wasted is not our national reproach.” The gap between the Cestrians’ opportunity and their exploitation of it is the chance the “sentimental tourist” seeks. The Chester essay finishes with a qualified assertion of the American’s privileged relation to picturesque Europe: “in the excess of his elation,” the American may be “tempted to accuse his English neighbours of being indifferent, unperceptive, uninspired, and to affirm that they do not half discern their good fortune, and that it takes a poor disinherited Yankee to appreciate the ‘points’ of this admirable country” (Transatlantic 19). Thus James makes imaginative space for himself, casting himself as the “typical American” in whose heart the idea of the picturesque will ever survive; but just as he authorizes himself to act as the consciousness in which the European spectacle can be apprehended, he speaks of the “complacency,” the “excess of elation,” and the temptation to which the tourist is prone—the very temptation to which James is in the act of submitting.

James’s Europe-leaning American envisions “Europe” whole, as the repository of values not prized at home and as the sensitive American’s opportunity and compensation. Often, a cultural dichotomy basic to Americans of European extraction (America/Europe) combines in James’s work with a corresponding dichotomy basic to British and Northern European cultures (cisalpine/transalpine), producing texts in which an especially keen anticipation of Italy is accompanied by an ever more acute sense of conflicting interests. While the effusive Italophile writings recount a desire for the southern land so intense that it calls forth the language of sexual passion (for instance, with James or one of his narrators speaking of “embracing” Italy), the writings also feature numerous passages describing confrontations that challenge the picturesque tourist’s scheme of values. The 1873 essay “A Roman Holiday” offers an example. After describing a stroll past many of Rome’s celebrated attractions—Capitol, Forum, Arch of Titus, Coliseum, Saint John Lateran and Santa Maria Maggiore—James comments that it is not merely by attention to monuments such as these but “by the aimless flânerie which leaves you free to follow capriciously every hint of entertainment, that you get to know Rome.” The “greater part of Roman life goes on in the streets,” which are “full of picturesque and curious incident.” Those streets, James concedes, may at times be “rather unsavory”; the “nameless uncleanness with which all Roman things are oversmeared” had at first struck him as “a damning token of moral vileness,” inclining him to look on “more even [with] contempt than pity for Roman poverty, and . . . with inexpressible irritation at the grovelling creatures who complacently vegetate in the midst of it.” But James will now have us understand that he is learning to outgrow this jejune reaction. An “old sojourner” in Rome has advised him that “you
don’t really like [Rome] till you like the dirt”—a position James is beginning to appreciate (Transatlantic 126–27).

But another American acquaintance, we read, has lashed out at James that it is “monstrous to come here and feast on human misery”; overwhelmed by “the squalor, the shabbiness, the provincialism, the barbarism,” this tourist is oppressed by the longing to “go somewhere and drink deep of modern civilization.” Especially troubling for him is the consideration that the patronage of tourists and foreign artists traps the locals in their loathsome condition, rendering them dependent on charity and the meager wages they can earn as artists’ models. “This morning, as I came up the Scalianta,” James’s interlocutor says, “I felt as if I could strangle every one of those filthy models that loaf there in their shameless degradation.” He continues:

Isn’t it an abomination that our enjoyment here directly implies their wretchedness; their knowing neither how to read nor to write, their draping themselves in mouldy rags, their never doing a stroke of honest work, their wearing those mummy swathings round their legs from one year’s end to another? So they’re kept, that Rome may be picturesque, and forestieri abound, and a lot of profligate artists may paint wretchedly poor pictures of them. . . . (Transatlantic 128)

James’s response is a calm attempt to justify the ways of Rome, and the proclivities of the sightseer, to the American moralist. To his departing friend he writes:

[The love of Rome is, in its last analysis, simply that perfectly honourable and legitimate instinct, the love of the status quo—the preference of contemplative and slow-moving minds for the visible, palpable, measurable present—touched here and there with the warm lights and shadows of the past. “What you call dirt,” an excellent authority has affirmed, “I call color”; and it is certain that, if cleanliness is next to godliness, it is a very distant neighbor to chiaroscuro. That I have come to relish dirt as dirt, I hesitate yet awhile to affirm; but I admit that, as I walk about the streets and glance under black archways into dim old courts and up mouldering palace facades at the colored rags that flap over the twisted balustrades of balconies, I find I very much enjoy their “tone”; and I remain vaguely conscious that it would require a strong stomach to resolve this tone into its component elements. I do not know that my immortal soul permanently suffers; it simply retires for a moment to give place to that of a hankering water-color sketcher. (Transatlantic 129)

Staying on in Rome, James has outlasted his qualms. This passage is less a “not guilty” plea than a refusal to answer the charge as put forward; we are back to talking about “tone,” “color,” and “chiaroscuro,” not about those people in the street or how “our enjoyment here directly implies their wretchedness.” Of the beggar-models on the Spanish Steps, James does admit, “I have been lately going somewhat to the studios, [and] the sight of the copies has filled me with compassionate tenderness for the originals. I regard them as an abused and persecuted race, and I freely forgive them their decomposing gaiters and their dusky intellects” (Transatlantic 129–30). The coup de grace here is surely James’s “freely forgiving” those whose decrepitude might spoil his holiday. It is when they resemble their representations that the Romans become fit objects for the tourist’s tenderness.

James equates knowledge and “love” of Rome with the capacity to treat everything as aesthetic spectacle; moral questions fade into moralistic impertinences because they are based on a superficial acquaintance with a place whose essence is to be picturesque (see Maves 9–45). In James’s responses of this sort, the whole category of the moral (or political or social) tends to give way, in a Nietzschean manner, before the superior category of the aesthetic. Yet the assertions and arguments of the travel texts are always equivocal, and in returning time and again to situations potentially embarrassing to picturesqueness, the texts fretfully test their own discursive mode. In one essay, a beautiful Venetian child begging for coppers makes James reflect, “Verily, nature is still at odds with fortune; though, indeed, if they ever really pull together, I am afraid nature will lose her picturesqueness” (Transatlantic 89). The aesthetics of the human picturesque has a price: it may require some integument of dinginess and destitution. A decade later, describing some poor but picturesque Venetians, James writes, “It is
not easy to say that one would have them other than they are,” and he adds, “[I]t certainly would make an immense difference should they be better fed.” But while he acknowledges that “the misery of Venice stands there for all the world to see [as] part of the spectacle,” James takes pains to point out that he is not the “thorough-going devotee of local colour” who “might consistently say it is part of the pleasure” (Portraits 4, 3). “There is something heartless,” he admits elsewhere,

in stepping forth into the streets of a foreign town to feast upon novelty when the novelty consists simply of the slightly different costume in which hunger and labour present themselves. . . . [H]alf the time we are admiring the brightness of the Italian smile the romantic natives may be, in reality, in a sullen frenzy of impatience and pain. Our observation in any foreign land is extremely superficial, and our remarks are happily not addressed to the inhabitants themselves, who would be sure to exclaim upon the impudence of the fancy-picture.

(Portraits 50–51)

James goes on to create an ironic counterpart to that “sublime synthesis” from which he dated his grasp of “Europe.” He writes of watching a young man trudge up a road in the Italian countryside near “a very picturesque old city upon a mountain-top.” Like “a cavalier in an opera,” the man has his coat slung nonchalantly over his shoulder, and he sings as he approaches. Mountaintop, old city, and operatic Italian fit the satisfying pattern of castle, ruin, and peasant; James tells himself he has learned something essential about Italy. But when he makes the mistake of speaking to his Italian, the fellow “prove[s] to be a brooding young radical and communist, . . . an unhappy, underfed, unemployed young man, who took a hard, grim view of everything, and was operatic only quite in spite of himself.” Thwarted in his effort to match the scene before him with the image-nation he knows, James reflects that it was “very absurd . . . to have looked at [the Italian] simply as a graceful ornament to the prospect, an harmonious little figure in the middle distance. ‘Damn the prospect, damn the middle distance!’ would have been all his philosophy” (Portraits 51, 52, 53).

Can the Other speak in the discourse that constructs it? James’s smashing of his picturesque fancies represents an attempt to enable such intervention. If we consider James’s inherited language of the picturesque in the light of the Wittgensteinian analogy between vocabularies and tools, we may take these instances as signs that James was struggling with the instrument in his hands, prey to the suspicion that some other vocabulary might yield some other “Europe” in which Europeans’ misery might not be overlooked or assimilated in the interest of consistency. But, as Richard Rorty points out, while “the craftsman typically knows what job he needs to do before picking or inventing tools with which to do it,” the enterprise of cultural redescription proceeds with no such clear aim in view (12–13). What a postpicturesque vocabulary would be, and what it would be for, James could not easily envision. The “Europe” it described might be better able to cope with historicity, change, and the everydayness of politics and society (see Barthes, “Blue Guide” 75–76). In the circumstances, a variety of factors surrounding James’s adult introduction to Europe conspired to complicate any serene prosecution of the picturesque. In 1869, when the twenty-six-year-old James took his first unaccompanied trip abroad, he was in time to witness “the last months of the great drama of the Risorgimento” in Italy, the advent of a unified German state, the wake of the Second Reform Bill in England, and the preparations for war between France and Prussia (Edel, Untried Years 303). A quest for the “sublime synthesis” of Europe is thrown into doubt when parts thereof compel acknowledgment of their mutability and their willingness to represent themselves.

Focusing on impressions of the peculiar and the purportedly “authentic,” picturesque travel had opened itself to the charge that it ignored what many began to think the source of true authenticity in Europe: namely, the vibrant ongoing life of contemporary places. “All the public life and history of the ancient Romans . . . is perfectly well known,” wrote William Wetmore Story in the early 1860s; but Rome’s “every-day life of To-day . . . has only been touched on here and there” (1: 7). Living people, not aestheticized places and things, seemed to Story and others to
constitute what “Rome” or “Italy” or “Europe” was all about. In the 1870s, Horace St. John wrote an essay demonstrating, contrary to the opinion of “poems, pictures, and tourists,” the existence of “an every-day Venice,” a “Vulgar Venice” that “artists rarely touch,” where “the Venetians lead their common lives” (99). This “prosaicist” response, under way by the time of James’s Wanderjahre (1869-79), was understandable, but it had two inherent dangers: a vision of the “common people” could invite idealizations no less stilted and stultifying than those sponsored by picturesqueness; and, in counteracting picturesqueness, prosaicism could tip the balance far in its own direction. James’s evolving fictional discourse attempts to overcome the false dichotomy of prosaicism’s “people” (i.e., culture as an ongoing way of life) versus the picturesque’s “places and things” (i.e., culture as objects). One solution might be a form of writing capable of testing and examining the relations among these elements—among people and the places and things around them, between the present and the accretions of history. It would be a form supple enough to consider, over the years, such issues as the mysterious bond connecting a modern Italian peasant with the intaglio of Tiberius he has casually unearthed on the Campagna (in James’s “Adina,” 1874) or the difference between the ways two women—the expatriate American Maria Gostrey and the aristocratic Parisian Madame de Vionnet—dwell among the cultural artifacts that fill their rooms (in The Ambassadors, 1903).

But we should be wary of the suggestion that James simply “outgrew” picturesqueness (see, e.g., Edel, “Italian Journeys”), leaving its allurements behind as he matured and focused on fiction. For the young James on his self-promoted cultural pilgrimage—as for many other tourists—the convention held advantages not easy to sacrifice. As long as European travel, performed “correctly,” commanded a price in the cultural markets of Britain and America, tourists would remain strongly motivated to claim that they had grasped the essential qualities of the places they visited. Packaging complex societies in appro priable form, the sublime synthesis afforded culturally marketable memories. One could demonstrate having traveled to the proper places in the proper way by showing that, when faced with some aggregate of impressions, one had rapturously inferred the whole. Such demonstrative acts of interpretation were offered in exchange for the approbation of one’s cultural trading partners. Later, after James had undertaken his expatriation, habits from the vocabulary and viewpoint of picturesqueness persisted. James’s sociopolitical judgments, meted out in response to the many forces disrupting Europe’s composition (its stillness), adopted this vocabulary and viewpoint, which favored images of European culture as past, as “motionless in its place” to the point of “sitting for its likeness” before the tourist-artist’s benevolent gaze (qtd. in Fussell 26). Political, economic, and technological processes aimed at “civilization, cleanliness, and comfort” were “heart-thrust[s]” or “death-blows” to the picturesque; the fortunes of the “poor dis papalized-dis-aestheticized Rome” of post-Risorgimento Italy were to be lamented (Letters 1: 244; 2: 283; 1: 247).

James’s “perfectly honourable . . . love of the status quo” made for a series of endorsements of what James called “Conservatism” or, in England, “Toryism”—designations that bear a tenuous relation to party politics. The prevailing sentiment was a warm response to institutions and tendencies that helped the ingredients of picturesqueness to accrue. “Self-complacent British Toryism is by no means a thing the irresponsible stranger should wish away,” James wrote; “it deepens local colour; it may be said to enhance the landscape” (Portraits 258). In Chester, he concluded:

Conservatism here has all the charm, and leaves dissent and democracy and other vulgar variations nothing but their bald logic. Conservatism has the cathedrals, the colleges, the castles, the gardens, the traditions, the associations, the fine names, the better manners, the poetry: Dissent has the dusky brick chapels in provincial by-streets, the names out of Dickens, the uncertain tenure of the h, and the poor mens sibi conscia recti. (Transatlantic 17)

The social analysis of the 1879 Hawthorne study, with its catalog of all the elements lacking in America that are necessary for a fully developed
culture, is adumbrated in passages like this. Picturesque politics could demand action, but it preferred action in the form of striking gestures in the world theater. Desiring to quiet those who said that England's "traditional prestige [was] completely extinct" and having long admired an English "greatness" that "was formerly much exemplified in [England's] 'taking' something," the "sympathetic stranger" wonders, "[C]an't she 'take' something now?" These remarks came at a time—1877—when Britain's imperialist press was agitating for the occupation of Egypt; the official powers in England, however, had their minds set on "sadly prosaic" issues. Gladstone focused on "the great questions of . . . local taxation and the liquor-laws," a phrase that to James's ears "made a painful discord," for "it was not as she should bend anxiously over these doubtless interesting subjects that the sympathetic stranger would seem to see England in his favourite posture—that, as Macaulay says, of hurling defiance at her foes" (Portraits 225, 226, 227).

Picturesque politics also marked James's novels and tales both early and late. In The Princess Casamassima (1886), a Continental tour teaches Hyacinth Robinson the lesson that, though "the monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it" may be based "upon the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies, and the rapacities of the past," it is thanks to them that "all the same, the world is less of a 'bloody sell' and life more of a lark. . . ." (Novels 6: 145-46). In the bizarre 1898 tale "Covering End," James restages his case that "it takes a poor disinherited Yankee"—or, in this instance, a millionaire tourist from "Missoura Top"—to take the true measure of Europe's cultural assets. The avid sightseer and collector Mrs. Gracedew arrives at the English country house "Covering End" to find that the heir, Captain Yule, has mortgaged the property in order to "squander" his inheritance on charity and socialist politics. She persuades him to drop his egalitarian ideals and do his duty to posterity—which includes, in family tradition, standing as Tory candidate for the district. Her American fortune redeems the estate; for good measure, she even marries Yule, so that in the end she may stand guard over his guardianship of England (see Complete Tales, vol. 10).

Mrs. Gracedew was acting on the version of the "culture idea" evident in James's travel writings of the 1870s, that "Europe" reveals its full worth and finds its safe haven in the picturesque tourist's consciousness. Certain well-placed Europeans could be found to support similar positions: such a one was Matthew Arnold, urging "culture" as a means for societies to overcome factional strife and to apprehend the complex unity in which all contestants were joined (see Herbert 55). But most of Europe's residents never seemed to relish their enviable condition, much as James might exhort them. This unhappy truth was manifested at a 1908 performance in Manchester of a dramatic version of "Covering End" called The High Bid. Leon Edel records that, "to the embarrassment of Gertrude Elliott," who played Mrs. Gracedew, the audience repeatedly "applauded the 'radical' speeches of [Captain Yule] rather than her romantic-historical flights" urging him to guard his picturesque home and heritage (Master 370).

Notes

1This discussion of alterity necessarily impinges on recent critical debates about the ways in which a discourse coercively constructs its "Other." While my work has clear affinities with this approach to cultural representation, I would make two qualifications. First, we should be wary of characterizing the Other as a pristine, integral entity unilaterally violated by discourse's construction of it. To idealize the Other in this fashion is to behave much like the travelers I consider in this essay. Second, some postcolonial critics have reversed but not overcome the objectification of otherness by regarding "Europe" or "the West" as a totality unanimously responsible for establishing "the Orient" and other reified forms. The coerciveness of these latter constructs is a point often (justifiably) argued; the former are no less coercive. The Other, as this essay implies, may exist in "Europe," and parts of "the West" may produce a useful Other from different parts.

2To the extent that the convention of viewing described here shapes objects as other, any specification of an "appreciable boundary" becomes moot: one need not limit consideration to marked physical or political borders, though they may assist the impulse to "other" what one looks at. One can
tendentiously “other” parts of one’s own nation or city by casting those parts as repositories and representatives of the society’s true (but neglected or violated) character. One can also renew familiar sights by taking an uncommon aesthetic perspective on them: Wordsworth’s view of London from Westminster Bridge is one famous instance and may be contrasted with Hazlitt’s view of Paris, discussed below.

In “The Reality Effect,” Barthes argues that supposedly “random” and “useless” textual details actually convey, through their sheer gratuitousness, “we are the real” (16). A function of the motifs I mention is to convey “we are the authentic.”

The conventional gender identification of nature in the Gilpin passage can help us grasp the extent to which the picturesque convention was from its inception a practice culturally coded “male.” For discussion of the ways this coding structures a gendered geography of places on the Continent, see Buzard 130–52. See MacDonald, James’s Italian Hours 37–55 (see also “Force of Revelation”), for a different interpretation of the link between the picturesque and wholeness. Her phenomenological reading of James gives us a plausible philosophical translation of James’s own accounts of his activities, but MacDonald does not attempt to consider the grounds or the internal contradictions of such self-representation.

Indeed, Jameson’s book dramatizes picturesque attitudes as well as expresses them: the nameless diarist is a quasi-fictional persona.

Too much dirt and poverty can destroy the framework of alterity that supports picturesqueness, causing travelers to recall “sordid” features at home. Trollope saw in the Roman states “a sadder picture of human misery, ignorance, and destitution than [she had] ever witnessed . . . except perhaps among the manufacturing population of Manchester and its neighbourhood . . .” (2: 162).

See Fussell 25–41 for an excellent discussion of the problem of containing historical and social change in James’s novel The American.

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