

Absentee American and Impatient Immigrant (Re)appraising the Promised Land: Henry James and Mary Antin on the New England Scene

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Revisiting his native country in 1904, Henry James responded, in essays that would later be collected as *The American Scene*, to a number of New England sites such as Boston's Public Library that Russian-Jewish immigrant Mary Antin would likewise privilege in her bestselling 1912 autobiography *The Promised Land*. This essay zooms in on the rhetorical peculiarities that may be detected in both texts (in particular, their use of metaphors and metonyms) and how these relate to ideological issues, such as the relation between ethnic Americans and native-born citizens, and to the psychology of (re-)immigration.

A Luxury Corrupting the Judgment¹

In his 1877 essay, "An English Easter," revised for *English Hours* (1905), Henry James admits his inability to give a technically analytical account

1. Henry James, *The American Scene*, in *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*, ed. Richard Howard (New York: Library of America, 1993) 368. Further references to this text will be given parenthetically.

of the architectural success that Canterbury Cathedral must undoubtedly be. All he can do is sketch “the picture, the mere builded *scene*.”² Thus he notes how the “huge Gothic tower ... detaches itself with tremendous effect”: “You see it base itself upon the roof as broadly as if it were striking roots in earth, and then pile itself away to a height which seems to make the very swallows dizzy as they drop from the topmost shelf.”³ Nature, in *English Hours*, is an important resource for the travel writer, but it is invariably a part of the “*builded scene*,” to shift the emphasis of James’s words. If the characterization of the bell tower draws on nature for its foundational imagery, James’s overall assessment of the cathedral stresses the latter’s indebtedness to its natural setting: the building’s “grand feature – its extraordinary and magnificent length” can be appreciated only by virtue of the crucial fact that it “stands amid grass and trees, with a cultivated margin all round it.”⁴

The challenge offered by the American scene is that it is such a strikingly *un*-builded scene. “Here was no church, to begin with,” James writes in the first chapter of *The American Scene*: “New England: An Autumn Impression” (375). Far from boasting huge towers that stand out from their surroundings while at the same time firmly rooting themselves there, all New England has to offer is the “shrill effect of [its] meeting-house, ... so merely continuous and congruous, as to type and tone, with the common objects about it, the single straight breath with which it seems to blow the ground clear of the seated solidity of religion ...” (375). Echoing the famous list of absences from the American scene that he had provided in *Hawthorne*,⁵ James, the “restless analyst” (as he regularly refers to himself in the book), here too registers the social emptiness of that scene – the fact that neither “the squire” nor “the parson” hold “sway” over it, as they do over “the familiar English landscape” (375). In addition, the travelogue expresses distress over the inveterate continuity

2. Henry James, *English Hours*, in *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*, ed. Richard Howard (New York: Library of America, 1993) 126. Unless otherwise noted, all emphases are taken from the originals.

3. James, *English Hours* 126-28.

4. James, *English Hours* 126.

5. “No State, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, ... no literature, no novels, no museums, ..., no Epsom nor Ascot!” See Henry James, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature: American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel, with the assistance of Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984) 352.

and congruity that make it impossible to analyze the scene, to distinguish among the items that make up this "vast and vacant" spectacle (376).

Yet, strangely, the language that James employs to give voice to his unhappiness seems to perform stylistically the very continuity and congruity that he so deplors thematically. The insistent alliteration that marks the passage just quoted links up those (closely adjacent) elements that share not only an initial consonant cluster but also a paradigmatic meaning, as in "continuous and congruous," "type and tone," "single straight," "vast and vacant." What is surprising, even at this microlevel, is that this negatively valenced list should be extended to include the equally alliterative but positively charged "seated solidity" with which it is supposedly contrasted; indeed, the latter's initial consonant even creates a syntagmatic continuity within the same clause with the "single straight breath" that has just been depicted as the "shrill" enemy. Moreover, at the macrolevel of *The American Scene* as a whole, alliteration acts as a ubiquitous phenomenon that is no mere stylistic quirk. Rather, it weaves together the text in a "continuous and congruous" manner that is distinctly at odds with the penetrative thrust of the analysis to which that text purports to submit the American scene – a manner that is, if anything, syntagmatically mimetic of the "criminal continuity" that, from a paradigmatic perspective, the critically minded narrator is constantly at pains to expose (736).

Throughout *The American Scene*, such is the basic tension that governs the passage between text and territory: on the one hand, the "restless analyst" is eager to probe beneath the surface of the American spectacle that he wants to understand; on the other hand, the narrator's sensibility frequently seems to beat to the same tune as the surface that provokes his penetrating impulse.⁶ This tendency can be observed not just at the stylistic level, but also at those moments when the narrator admits that "analysis [is] for once quite agreeably baffled," moments that occur much less rarely than "for once" would lead one to assume (527). But it would be misleading to suggest that *The American Scene* engages in site analysis only when the text is dominated by the voice of the "restless ana-

6. A wonderful account of James's penetrative urge in *The American Scene* is provided by Martha Banta, "'Strange Deserts': Hotels, Hospitals, Country Clubs, Prisons, and the City of Brotherly Love," *The Henry James Review* 17 (1996): 1-10.

lyst,” who examines, makes distinctions, classifies. No, as I will show, James’s largely fruitless attempts to get to grips with the American scene on such a paradigmatic basis ultimately find themselves more than matched by his successful submission to the syntagmatic charm of that scene.

James’s first impulse, however, is to meet the challenge of a New England that lacks culture and history by searching hard for whatever small items as might fill his deep need for these qualities. Thus he rhapsodizes the “house on a hilltop” that owns some “wondrous examples” of impressionist painting (393). Its effect on the spirit is like that of “a large slippery sweet inserted, without warning, between the compressed lips of half-conscious inanity” (393). The experience proves the “sovereign power of art,” and thus briefly erects a paradigmatic axis in the New England landscape (394). It is a fortuitous coincidence – unless it be a narrative invention – that the house is located on a hilltop, a geographical position that reinforces the “sovereign power” with which the narrator is so taken. Yet even here one cannot help but notice the pull of the horizontal axis in the alliteration that is once more inescapably present. Not only does the “house on a hilltop” overlook “the most composed of communities,” the art itself is for their consumer like a “large slippery sweet.” The initial consonant clusters of which this phrase consists (made up of the alliterative /s/ and /l/ as well as the /w/) all share the phonological feature “continuant” – produced as they are “with an incomplete closure of the vocal tract”⁷ – thus undergirding in their form precisely that continuous quality of New England that the “sovereign power of art” is at the same time supposedly exposing as unbearably empty (393). How strange, moreover, the content of the image is too. How odd that James should choose to describe the effect of art as a slippery sweet – an expression reminiscent, say, of “the sense of the slippery and of the sticky” that so unpleasantly marks Lionel Croy’s abode in the opening scene of *The Wings of the Dove*.⁸ And if painting by Manet, Degas, Monet, and

7. David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) 72.

8. See Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 1978) 21. The “large slippery sweet” must be qualified, too, in the light of James’s comments in a later section of *The American Scene* on the American “solicitation of sugar”: “The wage-earners, the toilers of old, notably in other climes, were known by the wealth of their songs; and has it, on these lines, been given to the American people to be known by the number of their ‘candies’ [?]” (517-18).

Whistler is welcomed as a “large slippery sweet,” is there such a sharp distinction between the pleasure high art affords and that “single strong savour” offered “among the mountains of Massachusetts and Connecticut” (388)? There, “the mere *fusion* of earth and air and water, of light and shade and colour, the almost shameless tolerance of nature for the poor human experiment, are so happily effective that you lose all reckoning of the items of the sum, that you in short find in your draught, contentedly, a single strong savour” (388-89; italics in original). In its “shameless tolerance” nature here becomes an all-embracing force whose capacity to fuse everything together takes care of any possible objection the critical bent of the restless analyst could come up with, of any attempt of his at “reckoning.” The upshot is that he undergoes this “mere *fusion* ... contentedly.”

If culture proves powerless to erect a barrier against the essentially syntagmatic force that operates throughout the American scene, so does history. Trying on this basis too to break New England’s “criminal continuity,” the narrator focuses on such traces of the region’s “history” as “the classic abandoned farm of the rude forefather who had lost patience with his fate” (736, 368). Yet these vestiges of the past – “the dried-up well, the cart-track vague and lost” – have largely been “reclaimed by nature and time” (368). Their “meagreness,” moreover, cannot compete with “the queer *other*, the larger, eloquence that one kept reading into the picture.” Even the historical legend of the Indian who jumped into the abyss from the “silvered summit” of Chocorua Mountain to escape his pursuers cannot command the observer’s interest amidst “the mere idleness of the undiscriminated, tangled actual.” Such is the larger eloquence of what James calls “naturalism in *quantity* ... such quantity as one hadn’t for years had to deal with” (368).⁹ Faced with a natural force that is so overwhelming, that casts such “an irresistible spell,” the narrator has to admit that here is “a luxury corrupting the judgment” (368).

9. As William Boelhower observes in the course of his own, brilliant account of Jamesian site analysis in *The American Scene*, “in no other Jamesian text is quantity so much in the foreground.” See “The Landscape of Democratic Sovereignty: Whitman and James Go Awalking,” in *Modern American Landscapes*, ed. Mick Gidley and Robert Lawson-Peebles (Amsterdam: VU Univ. Press, 1995) 65.

The Chill of Contiguity

The New England countryside also forms the setting for some of the traveler's most unsettling encounters with the ethnic other in the United States. Thus in a passage whose page-head reads "The Ubiquity of the Alien," the narrator recounts how, having lost his way "during a long ramble among the New Hampshire hills," he turns for help to a young man who has just emerged from a wood. "But his stare was blank, in answer to my inquiry" (454). Confidently drawing on his cultural literacy, the restless analyst reads the young man's "dark-eyed 'Latin' look" as a sign of "his being a French Canadian," or possibly an Italian immigrant. But neither of these languages proves successful in breaking the man's silence. It is only the exasperated exclamation "What *are* you then?" that produces the information that his interlocutor is an Armenian. Upset as he already is by his difficulty in ascertaining which language to adopt for ease of communication, the "restored absentee" experiences a particular "chill" when he finds that the Armenian-American seems to expect no social intercourse, no sense of "brotherhood" (457, 454, 455).¹⁰ The "vacant" American scene here finds its match in the new American's "blank" stare; the lack of susceptibility of that scene to analysis is paralleled by the impossibility of reading the Armenian-American's character (376, 454). Indeed, James goes on to speak of "the great 'ethnic' question" in terms that closely mirror his remarks on the overwhelming quality of America's "irresistible" "naturalism" (368): "the great 'ethnic' question rises before you on a corresponding scale and with a corresponding majesty" (455). It thus becomes just as pointless to try and answer the ethnic question as it is to try and escape from the vast and vacant natural scene. Only an "accepted vision of the too-defiant scale of numerosity and quantity" can be embraced, and rested in "at last as an absolute luxury" that does away with any attempt at judgment, at "some propriety of opinion" (456-57).¹¹

Alluding in a richly ironical vein to the scene with the Armenian, James's account of his visit to Salem opens with the following hyperbole:

10. For a similar reading of James's silent exchange with the Italians on the Jersey shore, see William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987) 21-24.

11. This passage and closely related ones are explored in more detail by Gert Buelens, "James's 'Aliens': Consuming, Performing, and Judging the American Scene," *Modern Philology* 96 (1999): 347-63.

It never failed that if in moving about I made, under stress, an inquiry, I should prove to have made it of a flagrant foreigner. It never happened that, addressing a fellow-citizen, in the street, on one of those hazards of possible communion with the indigenous spirit, I should not draw a blank. So, inevitably, at Salem, when, wandering perhaps astray, I asked my way to the House of the Seven Gables, the young man I had overtaken was true to his nature; he stared at me as a remorseless Italian – as remorseless, at least, as six months of Salem could leave him. (572)

But if the similarity of this experience to the earlier one is striking – even at the level of the lexical choice of calling the stare blank – the moment is particularly interesting by virtue of James’s further speculation on how differently the accosted Italian in all likelihood would have valued the historical landmark the narrator is searching out. Wondering “how the native estimate of it as a romantic ruin might strike a taste formed for such features by the landscape of Italy,” James cannot preserve his original attraction to “the edifice of my fond fancy,” finding that he is now reduced to looking at it “through a polyglot air” (572, 574). That air is, significantly, not just polluted by the Italian – a Southern European who belongs to a class of particularly “flagrant” foreigners, undesirable to many Americans of Anglo-Irish descent – but also by “a civil Englishman,” full of “kindness and sympathy,” who likewise serves to point James’s way around Salem, directing him to some houses that in his opinion “formed the Grosvenor Square, as might be said, of Salem” (573). The effect of this comparison on the narrator is not a happy one. He had “never bargained for” such a way of considering his very own Salem (573). The presence of the Italian and the Englishman rearranges this site so that the vertical associations James had been seeking there – those not only of “Hawthorne’s Salem, and the witches” but also of personal history in the form of an earlier occasion when he had stayed at the place – are replaced by horizontal ones that extend across the ocean to European landscapes (572). These geographical associations not only push aside the historical ones; they also diminish the special value that James had been eager to assign to these American sites. What is so flagrant and remorseless about the foreigners James meets, no matter how civil and full of kindness they be, is not so much that they answer his inquiries with a blank stare, but rather that their contiguity exposes the American scene for the cultural and historical blank that it ultimately is. The criminal continuity, that is, stops nowhere: the “polyglot air” blurs

James's "native" vision of Salem with the thought of how others perceive the place. His own "approximation" of the site – his own comparisons and similes – is mixed up with those non-native ones, and realizing this leaves him "rather essentially shaken" (572-74).

But it is important to remember that James's own "native" status is a rather questionable one. Recall that he often labels himself the "restored absentee," a cognomen that reminds the reader of his twenty-year absence from the country of his birth. Indeed, as he famously puts it in the context of his ruminations on "the great 'ethnic' question," "Who and what is an alien ... in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history? ... Which is the American ... – which is *not* the alien ... and where does one put a finger on the dividing line ...?" (459). The difficulty of distinguishing national paradigms is not just due to the troubling presence of Italians and Englishmen in New England, the restored absentee is at times just as flagrant a foreigner on this scene. Consider his response to what he calls "The New England Arcadia" in one of the running titles of the first chapter (367). Wandering about in the "deep valleys and the wide woodlands," James is full of "the beauty of the impression." The New England "hills and woods ... play on the chords of memory and association," but the memory is not just that of "some bedimmed summer of the distant prime" spent in the area. Actually, there is "much unacquaintedness" with what he sees; he is struck above all by "the newness, to my eyes, ... of the particular rich region."¹² As to association, the "whole connotation" that is brought home is that of "the Arcadia of an old tapestry, an old legend, an old love-story in fifteen volumes, one of those of Mademoiselle de Scudéri." In other words, the whole connotation is incorrigibly European, as the term Arcadia would already lead one to suspect. The New England "hillsides and rocky eminences and wild orchards ... could strike one as the more exquisitely and ideally Sicilian, Theocritan, poetic, romantic, academic, from their not bearing the burden of too much history" (367-68). If the restless analyst on principle complains of the lack of history on the American scene, he is ready to admit, in passing, that it is the very absence of historical reference points that

12. A fascinating rhetorical exploration of "James's encounter with the 'virgin' text of America" that focuses on its dramatization of "the problem of the allegorical sign" is offered by Sheila Teahan, "Engendering Culture in *The American Scene*," *The Henry James Review* 17 (1996): 52-57 (quotation from 52).

allows this American landscape to take on all the redemptive features of “the idyllic *type* in its purity” – a type that has of course been shaped in classical Europe, and a purity that is preserved exactly by virtue of New England’s emptiness (367). Clearly then that criminal continuity that makes a mouthful even of the mighty Atlantic (to paraphrase James’s final-page line) is perpetrated not just by the recent immigrants and tourists who adulterate the native’s perception of his place, but is also indulged in by a restored absentee who is grateful when the natural landscape of his country of birth can be assimilated to a European model.

The “American Weimar” Company

If the New England landscape provokes associations that are at times undesirably syntagmatic, the analyst’s attempt at ascertaining a genuinely American paradigm is not always unsuccessful. Thus Concord, that “charming woody and watery place,” is pleasantly haunted by “the local Emerson and Thoreau and Hawthorne and (in a fainter way) *tutti quanti*” (568). Referring to them as “the ‘American Weimar’ company,” James goes on to admit that “we may smile a little as we ‘drag in’ Weimar,” but immediately adds that he is “much more satisfied than not by our happy equivalent, ‘in American money,’ for Goethe and Schiller” (568, 571). The smile, then, seems to ironize the American company in relation to its more illustrious European counterpart – even the quotation marks around “in American money” are suggestive of an inescapable metonymical link between American intellectual achievement and a suspect materialist way of measuring value. Yet, James goes on to make it clear that his appreciation of his compatriots’ work is quite genuine. “I open Emerson for the same benefit for which I open Goethe, the sense of moving in large intellectual space ... and whatever I open Thoreau for (I needn’t take space here for the good reasons) I open him oftener than I open Schiller” (571-72). And to bestow such compliments on Thoreau and particularly Emerson – the silver and gold respectively of “the ‘Concord school’” – is also to pay a compliment to the territory from which they drew so much of their text, and to which their texts in turn imparted such quantities (571):

[T]he rarity of Emerson's genius, which has made him ... the first, and the one really rare, American spirit in letters, couldn't have spent his career [at Concord] without an effect as of the communication to it of something ineffaceable. It was during his long span his immediate concrete, sufficient world; it gave him his nearest vision of life, and he drew half his images, we recognize, from the revolution of its seasons and the play of its manners. ... It is admirably, to-day, as if we were still seeing these things *in* those images ... [N]ot a russet leaf fell for me, while I was there, but fell with an Emersonian drop. (572)

Concord is not just the place inhabited by Emerson's genius. It also breathes the spirit of American political history so actively that James imagines himself catching, "on the breeze, the mitigated perfect tense" (568). History is here not a matter of what was but of what has been: "You know there has been a fight between our men and the King's" – one wouldn't have been surprised, that crystalline Sunday noon, where so little had changed, where the stream and the bridge, and all nature, and the *feeling*, above all, so directly testify, at any fresh-sounding form of such an announcement" (568). Political history takes the form, importantly, of that 1775 battle at Concord that marked one of the first stages in the War of Independence. James waxes quite lyrical on the "colossal quantity and value" of the minutemen's action on behalf of later generations of Americans (570). Yet there is also "exquisite melancholy" in "the pity and the irony of the *precluded* relation on the part of the fallen defenders" (569). That is to say, present-day Americans like James himself can at once enjoy the fruits of the Concord Fight in the here and now *and* undergo the special atmosphere of the place so as to feel at one with "the toil and trouble of our forefathers" (570). The act of historical imagining is cruelly unidirectional: "The sense that was theirs and that moved them we know, but we seem to know better still the sense that wasn't and that couldn't, and that forms our luxurious heritage as our eyes, across the gulf, seek to meet their eyes; so that we are almost ashamed of taking so much ... as the equivalent of their dimly-seeing offer" (569-70). The relation between text and territory is always such that "we read into the scene"; it can never read into us (569). As archaeologists of a site that has historical meaning for ourselves, we are constantly made aware of the moral dubiety of our activity: is not "the imagination that yearns over" these historical figures enjoying them "at their cost" (570)? "Was it delicate, was it decent – that is *would* it have been – to ask the embattled

farmers, simple-minded, unwitting folk, to make us so inordinate a present with so little of the conscious credit of it?" Is not our historical speculation in sharp contrast to their "disinterested sacrifice"? In summing up these thought movements, James invokes a telling simile: "The minute-men at the bridge were of course interested intensely, as they believed – but such, too, was the artful manner in which we see *our* latent, lurking, waiting interest like, [sic] a Jew in a dusky backshop, providentially bait the trap" (570). Ultimately, the "gulf" that divides the narrator from his American ancestors is so wide that he ends up by likening himself to a member of that class of immigrants that will strike him elsewhere on the American scene as so utterly "alien." The historical gulf is, in the final reckoning, as wide as, if not wider than, the ocean that separates America from Europe.

This is mine – This is ours

We have examined how James, the restored absentee, views his native country after a prolonged absence – how he responds to its natural scene as both unbearably empty (culturally, historically) and possessed of an overwhelming quality that is capable of casting an irresistible spell; how encounters with the ethnic other there impart a chill of contiguity that is particularly poignant in the way it contaminates James's perception of treasured New England sites by inopportunistly suggesting European points of comparison; and how no ethnic others need in fact be around for James to feel uneasy about his cultural and historical relation to the country of his birth, no matter the amount of praise he may bestow on it. What happens when we turn now to a text that responds to the same New England territory, but that was written by one of the ethnic others themselves?

Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* has long been recognized as an important document. First serialized by the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1911, this autobiography of a Jewish immigrant who had lived in Polotzk, Russia, until the age of thirteen, before settling in Boston in 1894, was a great popular success. It headed the non-fiction bestseller list for 1912, the year

in which it was published in book form by the prestigious Boston firm of Houghton Mifflin.¹³ As Werner Sollors chronicles in his superb sixty-page introduction to the reprint of the work as a “Penguin Twentieth-Century Classic,” “*The Promised Land* was also published in special educational editions ... and was used as a public school civics class text ‘as late as 1949.’”¹⁴

Though a mere five years separate their dates of publication, superficially regarded *The American Scene* and *The Promised Land* could not be more different. James’s text is often deeply critical of precisely those American phenomena and values that Antin’s text exalts. Boston Public Library, for instance, is for Antin “this noble treasure house of learning” and “my palace,”¹⁵ while for James “the promiscuous bustle of the Florentine palace by Copley Square” speaks “more of the power of the purse and of the higher turn for business than of the old intellectual, or even of the old moral, sensibility” (559). It is at once the scale of the building and the fact that it is open to the public at large that James objects to. If similar places in European cities are publicly accessible too, the manner in which the public regards its privilege is very different. The distinction is one “between a benefit given and a benefit taken, a borrowed, lent, and an owned, an appropriated convenience” (560). American democracy, unlike its English equivalent, “is social as well as political,” and “social democracies are unfriendly to the preservation of *penetralia*; so that when *penetralia* are of the essence, as in a place of study and meditation, they inevitably go to the wall” (560).

One is tempted to speculate that Antin had read the “Boston” chapter of *The American Scene*, or its prepublication in the *North American Review* and *Fortnightly Review* of March 1906, so closely does her own response match James’s – or rather, so well can it serve as a rebuttal to it.¹⁶ “It was my habit,” Antin writes,

13. See Alice Payne Hackett, *70 Years of Bestsellers: 1895-1965* (New York: Bowker, 1967) 108.

14. Werner Sollors, Introduction, *The Promised Land*, by Mary Antin (New York: Penguin, 1997) xxxii.

15. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (New York: Penguin, 1997) 266. Further references to this text will be given parenthetically.

16. The chapters of *The Promised Land* to which this section belongs were written in the early months of 1910, which is neither close enough to the date of journal publication of “Boston,” nor to that of *The American Scene* (February 1907). I have been unable to ascertain whether Antin owned a copy of James’s travelogue.

to go very slowly up the low, broad steps to the palace entrance, pleasing my eyes with the majestic lines of the building, and lingering to read again the carved inscriptions: *Public Library – Built by the People – Free to All.*

Did I not say it was my palace? Mine, because I was a citizen; mine, though I was born an alien; mine, though I lived on Dover Street. My palace – *mine!* (265-66)

Unabashedly possessive, Antin here demonstrates to perfection her claim to what James calls “an owned, an appropriated convenience.” Yet the narratorial voice in *The Promised Land* is at once so frankly proud and so lovingly respectful of the library and its aesthetic appeal that the term “convenience” would seem oddly off key if applied to the attitude Antin documents. The “promiscuous bustle” to which James takes exception – produced by the “ubiquitous children” in particular, “*most* irrepressible democrats of the democracy” (561) – is exactly what Antin pauses to admire on her way in:

I loved to lean against a pillar in the entrance hall, watching the people go in and out. Groups of children hushed their chatter at the entrance, and skipped, whispering and giggling in their fists, up the grand stairway Spectacled scholars came slowly down the stairs, loaded with books, heedless of the lofty arches that echoed their steps. Visitors from out of town lingered long in the entrance hall, studying the inscriptions and symbols on the marble floor. And I loved to stand in the midst of all this, and remind myself that I was there, that I had a right to be there, that I was at home there. All these eager children, all these fine-browed women, all these scholars going home to write learned books – I and they had this glorious thing in common It was wonderful to say, *This is mine*; it was thrilling to say, *This is ours.* (266)

Notice Antin’s nice touch in registering how the scholars are oblivious of the echoing sound they produce while the children at least make an effort to tone down their native exuberance. The emphasis of her account, though, squarely rests on the full comprehensiveness that is implied by the inscription “*Free to All.*” Boston Public Library creates a community of citizens united in their love of learning, so that the potentially ugly possessiveness of “*mine*” can be swiftly extended to the all-inclusive “*ours*,” where that possessive pronoun embraces both the immigrant and the American of long standing.

Yet to see *The Promised Land* only as a retort to *The American Scene* would be to set up a contrast between ethnic immigrant and settled American that simplifies both of these highly complex responses to the New World. There are in fact, even in their very different reports on Boston Public Library, strong parallels between the two texts. “The courtyard,”

Antin writes, “was my sky-roofed chamber of dreams. Slowly strolling past the endless pillars of the collonade, . . . I imagined that I was a Greek of the classic days, treading on sandalled feet through the glistening marble porticoes of Athens” (266). James for his part registers his “immediate charmed perception of the character of the deep court and inner arcade of the palace, where a wealth of science and taste has gone to producing a sense, when the afternoon light sadly slants, of one of the myriad gold-coloured courts of the Vatican” (561). Antin’s love of “the grand stairway” too mirrors James’s admiration for “the rich staircase,” which he singles out as “the main feature” of the place (561). Antin admits that it took years before she could enjoy the “Chavannes series around the main staircase” (266) but in acknowledging as much she actually helps us understand some of James’s “shock” at finding “the so brave decorative designs of Puvis de Chavannes . . . hanging over mere chambers of familiarity and resonance” (561). “I thought the pictures looked faded,” Antin explains, “and their symbolism somehow failed to move me at first” (266). *This is ours*, certainly, but it may require some years of aesthetic maturation before all of “us” can appreciate the appeal of the more challenging artists that decorate this most public of places.

James’s disturbance over the fact that “decorative designs” of this order serve to adorn a site marked by such “multitudinous bustle” is quickly superseded, though, by “a shock still greater perhaps[:] to find one had no good reason for defending them against such freedoms” (561). For if he considers the library’s courtyard worthy of comparison to an Italian model, and if he admires the art that beautifies its rooms and hallways, he is duty-bound to admit that he had, “in the public places and under the great loggias of Italy, acclaimed it as just the charm and the dignity of these resorts that, in their pictured and embroidered state, they still serve for the graceful common life” (561). So the grounds on which it was James’s impulse to criticize Boston Public Library – that its excessive openness not only clashes with its intended function (study) but also with its aesthetic aspirations – turn out to be no more than quicksand when James realizes that these are the very grounds on which he has enjoyed European sites. As was the case with the New England Arcadia, we can once more observe how James’s efforts at analyzing the specific character of the American scene fall victim to a criminal continuity of his own making between New World and Old World paradigms. If in the

Arcadian case his desire to bring out the natural beauty of a culturally empty American countryside seduced him to purely European similes, now his critical impulse is fatally unsettled when he realizes that what he purports to dislike about an American site is precisely what he would have loved about a European one. Can his eye ever be innocent of its European slant?

I Want to Reconstruct My Childhood

James's incorrigibly European perspective, it is worth noting, finds its match in Antin's unbendingly American one in this part of her narrative. Both at times distort the image of their native continent by looking at it with the spectacles of their adopted continent. Notice that the Greek simile in Antin is merely an "imagined" one, taking place in the "chamber of dreams." When she actually recalls Europe, as she does throughout the book, it is hardly that of James's "myriad gold-coloured courts." Antin's Europe is Polotzk, on the Russian-Polish border, where she was "born in the prison of the Pale," as she takes care to remind the reader in the midst of her reflections on the glories of Boston (267). Sollors cogently points out that Boston Public Library is one of the "places of openness" that Antin contrasts to "spaces of division ('Within the Pale')." ¹⁷ The superstition that for her characterizes the Jewish pale into which she was born (and to which the first half of the narrative is wholly devoted) is set against "the openness of scholarship, education, and especially the science of naturalism" that occupy a central place in the American half of the book. ¹⁸

So firmly does Antin come down on the side of enlightened America that one of the American chapters silently revises the image of her mother that had been presented in a Russian chapter. ¹⁹ The later account stresses

17. Sollors xxix. "Within the Pale" is the title of Antin's first chapter.

18. Sollors xxix.

19. See Gert Buelens, "The New Man and the Mediator: (Non-)Remembrance in Jewish-American Immigrant Narrative," *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*, ed. Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1994) 89-113.

how mother, "like the majority of women in the Pale, had all her life taken her religion on authority. ... The law of the Fathers was binding to her, and the outward symbols of obedience inseparable from the spirit" (192-93). Mother is said to have been "shaken" by the fact that "young women of education were beginning to reject the wig after marriage" (193). Her own willingness to abandon her wig before setting out for America is analyzed as no more than a further sign of obedience, since she does so at the written instruction of her husband, who has preceded the rest of the family to the US. Antin comments: "Considering how the heavy burdens which she had borne from childhood had never allowed her time to think for herself at all, but had obliged her always to tread blindly in the beaten paths, I think it greatly to her credit that in her puzzling situation she did not lose her poise entirely" (193). The overall picture sketched from the point of view of this American chapter is of a "gentle, self-effacing" woman who is and always has been as docile, uneducated and submissive as the other Jewish women of the Pale: "she bore lovingly the yoke of prescribed conduct" (193-94).

The image that is presented by an earlier Russian chapter is significantly different. Here the emphasis lies on how unusual mother was as a child and adolescent. Against considerable odds, mother "teased and coaxed" her way to much more of an education than was common for a young woman of her time and place, managing to "read and write Russian, and translate a simple passage of Hebrew" at an early age (42-43). She did not stop at bookish knowledge, but "was as ambitious about housework as about books": "She was ... quick at everything, and restless with unspent energy. Therefore she was quite willing, at the age of ten, to go into her father's business as his chief assistant" (43). "As the years went by," this account continues, "she developed a decided talent for business, so that her father could safely leave all his affairs in her hands if he had to go out of town. Her devotion, ability, and tireless energy made her, in time, indispensable" (43). These qualities also ensured that her entreaties to be allowed to enter "on a career of higher education" at the age of fifteen were honored (43). Antin here highlights her mother's enterprise and independent-mindedness in a manner that ill prepares for the later accentuation of her innate submissiveness. She also relates how her mother was "the idol of her aunt Hode, the fiddler's wife," a rich woman who traveled widely, mixed with the Russian world,

and scandalized a “breathless” Jewish community by “wearing silk dresses on week days,” and displaying “strange ways” that she had acquired in her travels (45). Antin’s mother spent “days at a time” with her aunt, who told her “wonderful tales of life in distant parts” (45-46). Would a young Jewish woman who was exposed to such an exceptional range of scholarly and real-life influences go on to respond a few years later in a “shaken” fashion to the idea of abandoning a wig? Perhaps. Antin does stress how her mother’s “career of higher education” was quickly cut short through the intervention of the marriage broker; how strong were the pressures on mother, who did what “a dutiful daughter” should do, and got married by the age of sixteen (47). Yet, even after marriage, mother’s business skills “naturally” made her the “leader” of the family business, going from strength to strength (54). It seems clear that the American section of *The Promised Land* pursues a different agenda when it summarizes so complex a picture by stating that mother had been forced “always to tread blindly in the beaten paths” and experienced “individual freedom” as “confusion” (193-94).

That agenda is a freethinking one in which nature plays a crucial part. The “Miracles” chapter, in which the revisionist picture of Antin’s mother occurs, relates how even as a child Antin found she could not believe in God, sensing instead that “Nature made me,” as she puts it in the course of a heated dispute with some (gentile) classmates (191). “I considered myself absolutely, eternally, delightfully emancipated from the yoke of indefensible superstitions” (196). Mother in this context has to serve as a counterexample, illustrating how the typical European Jewish woman had unquestioningly borne such a yoke. A rabbi who refused to answer some questions of the young Antin’s was unable to do so “because the truth was not whispered outside America. I was very much in love with my enlightenment, and eager for opportunities to give proof of it” (196). When an early opportunity presents itself, Antin all but fails the test of her American freethinking enlightenment. Invited to take a meal at the house of her teacher, she is offered some ham, “and I, the liberal, the free, was afraid to touch it!”: “I was furious with myself for my weakness. I to be afraid of a pink piece of pig’s flesh, who had defied at least two religions in defence of free thought!” (196). She does eat the meat, “but only a newly abnegated Jew can understand with what

squirming, what protesting of the inner man, what exquisite abhorrence of myself" (196). Explaining the chapter's title, she reflects that it required a "miracle of self-control" to achieve this feat (197). Yet the miracle is also that "so ridiculous a thing ... should be the symbol and test of things so august," an observation that Antin expands into a reaffirmation of a vaguely humanist philosophy with an Emersonian inflection: "To think that in the mental life of a half-grown child should be reflected the struggles and triumphs of the ages! ... I am a wonderful thing, being human; ... I am the image of the universe, being myself" (197). The revisionary account of mother is thus undertaken from its insistently American perspective precisely at a point when Antin is broaching an incident that proves how diehard are the old European Jewish instincts within her. When the European past threatens to reassert its claim on one of its products, it must be relocated firmly to a duly distant position.

The Freedom of Outdoors, the Society of Congenial Friends

Antin is willing to recognize the persistence of Jewish dietary reflexes as a momentary obstacle on the road to full membership in the promised land of America. Yet, the overall thrust of her book is to make "tyrannical Russia the problem and democratic America the solution, patriarchal and rule-governed Judaism the question and a form of flexible 'Hebrew-Christian' universalism, open to men and women, the fulfillment – in a quest that would be more fully convincing if the ... skepticism with which Antin approaches the Old World were also applied to the New."²⁰ Nonetheless, there is a different, more implicit narrative within *The Promised Land* that is far less enthusiastic about the New World than the explicit story. As Sollors points out, "Antin's memoir movingly evokes the specific tastes of the past, [but] no delight in foodways brightens the memories of her American years."²¹ From a similar perspective, Betty Bergland has devoted a fascinating study to the eighteen photographs that

20. Sollors xv.

21. Sollors xvi.

accompanied the original edition (reproduced in the Penguin reprint).²² What she finds remarkable is how strongly *The Promised Land* departs from the pattern set by other immigrant photographs. The set piece commonly focused on the immigrants themselves, dressed in their Sunday best, surrounded by the signs of their prosperity (in some cases even dining table and fridge were moved out of doors to form a suitable foreground with their proud owners to the background of their American home). But whereas Antin's Russian pictures depict her grandfather's house and includes portraits of her father and of her pre-American self, none of the American pictures conforms to the expected pattern. There is no portrait of the author, or of any of her relatives; the only pictures that approximate the "American home" model are dreary ones of a blind alley, "Where My New Home Waited for Me," and of a poor street in Boston's South End (from which the text says she was glad to "escape") (147, 209). There are no images of successful dwelling in the new land. What the reader does get is an almost artistic picture of "the Dim Tangle of Railroad Tracks" outside Boston's South Station (235); a picture of five unidentified nature enthusiasts, actively examining a little stream outside a wood; a bird's eye view of Bates Hall in Boston Public Library, filled with readers; a wide-angle photograph of the study of the philanthropist Edward Everett Hale; and finally a rocky coastline.

Clearly, this range of photographs tells its own story, a story that strengthens *The Promised Land's* implicit narrative. Antin's belief in the principle of America is vivid, but her sense of the practical obstacles to an immigrant's making a success of living in the place is strong as well. If Antin's words are inspired by a desire "to offset a growing sense of American nativist hostility to immigration by presenting the inwardness of a consciousness that underwent the transformation from foreign immigrant to American citizen successfully," then the photographs help to show how hard it was to achieve this transformation.²³ For one thing, many immigrants never succeeded in moving away from the irony of a

22. Betty Bergland, "Rereading Photographs and Narratives in Ethnic Autobiography: Memory and Subjectivity in Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*," *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*, ed. Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1994) 45-88.

23. Sollors xv.

“New Home” in a blind alley; that no other New Home is depicted dramatizes the bleak American future that they faced. For another, the impersonal images of nature and intellectual study may be regarded as no less but also no more than the New Home that Antin herself did find.²⁴

As Antin puts it at the beginning of the chapter entitled “The Burning Bush” (“with obvious allusions to the transformation of Moses in the divine presence”),²⁵ discovering nature “was the second transformation of my life, as truly as my coming to America was the first ...”: “The whole structure of my life was transfigured by my novel experiences outdoors” as a member of the Natural History Club (251, 258). What appeals to her in nature is not just “the orderly array of facts, but the glimpse I caught ... of the grand principles underlying the facts”: “all creation was remodelled on a grander scale ... and my problems ... were carried up to the heights of the impersonal, and ceased to torment me” (258, 261). The problems Antin is here referring to are ostensibly philosophical ones such as “why I was born and why I could not live forever” (260). Yet, when she reports her joy at having found “the high peaks of the promised land of evolution,” the intermingling of America and nature is too manifest to be ignored (262). “Vastly as my mind had stretched to embrace the idea of a great country, when I exchanged Polotzk for America, it was no such enlargement as I now experienced, when in place of the measurable earth, with its paltry tale of historic centuries, I was given the illimitable universe to contemplate, with the numberless aeons of infinite time” (258). Doubtlessly, impersonal nature also offers a way of dismissing the problems of historic time, such as the realities of immigrant hopelessness, and of nativist hostility to immigration. Rhetorically speaking, the metaphor of the promised land that has come under considerable stress in Antin’s story can thus be reactivated to refer to a truly limitless space and time. The relationship between territory and text, which has become problematical in the absence of any concrete realization of the land’s promise (visual or narrative), can be renegotiated, partly by means of

24. Indeed, the indistinct female figure sitting at a desk in the Hale study, with her back to a man who is presumably Hale, may well be Mary Antin, as Sollors has established (Werner Sollors, Explanatory Notes, *The Promised Land*, by Mary Antin [New York: Penguin, 1997] 305). But neither caption nor text draws attention to this fact. Moreover, in labeling the place “The Famous Study, That Was Fit to Have Been Preserved as a Shrine” the caption hardly suggests reading this image as that of a living Home (Antin 272).

25. Bergland 71.

photographic “representations of the Americanization process [that] remain abstract ..., absent any human or communal world,”²⁶ partly by refashioning the metaphor of the promised land to embrace both America and the natural universe.

However, in a further twist documented by Sollors, what is at stake in the “Burning Bush” chapter could as readily be summarized under the heading of metonymy as of metaphor. Whereas the printed text likens Antin’s feelings for nature to a “lover’s” (“I confess how late in my life nature took the first place in my affections” [251]), the manuscript of *The Promised Land* reveals how this particular love story displaced a more literal one “ultimately withheld” from the reader.²⁷ There is a strong syntagmatic link between the two stories since it was at the Natural History Club that Antin met her future husband Amadeus William Grabau. She eventually chose to remain silent on this point, replacing “a personal story by a tale of nature, her love for a scientist by her fascination with science.”²⁸ While there is a metaphorical, paradigmatic dimension to replacing the love for an individual by love of the universe, the substitution is more obviously metonymical in character: the scientist is displaced by his science – or, even at a further remove, by the object of his science: nature.

Why could Antin have decided to undertake such a tropological move between the manuscript and print stages of her book? After all, following Bergland’s argument, we can say that this operation actually weakens the text’s persuasive power, depriving its solution from “any human or communal” purchase.²⁹ The problem may well have been that Grabau was an American-born Lutheran of German descent.³⁰ To end the text on such a note, with the Russian-Jewish New Immigrant’s intermarriage to an American-born protestant of Old Immigrant stock, would have wholly changed the meaning of *The Promised Land*. It would have shown that there *is* a “human” solution to the narrative; that Antin’s “assertion ‘I am an American’” is not just the “abstract” one that Bergland derives from

26. Bergland 75.

27. Sollors xliii.

28. Sollors xliiii.

29. Bergland 75.

30. I take this information from Sollors (xli) but he does not relate it to the metonymical displacement that Antin’s love for Grabau undergoes in the text.

the printed and visual texts.³¹ In a letter cited by Sollors, Antin “casts her husband as typifying her adopted country.”³² But introducing such elements into her narrative would also have fatally diminished the power of Antin’s dramatization of “a consciousness that underwent the transformation from foreign immigrant to American citizen successfully.”³³ Inevitably, many readers would have reflected that this particular form of Americanization is hardly such a feat: the wife of a native-born American obviously becomes an American – through the force of contiguity, we might say. Moreover, so low was the intermarriage rate between Jews and Gentiles around the turn of the century that it is not normally expressed in percentages.³⁴ In such a sociohistorical context, admitting the rare fact of a Jewish-Gentile intermarriage into the text would have destroyed Antin’s claim that her history is “typical of many,” that her life “is a concrete illustration of a multitude of statistical facts,” that she speaks for thousands of Jewish immigrants, “oh, for thousands!” (2, 195).

Nature in Antin’s text is, then, blessedly impersonal in more ways than one. As a metaphor for America, it is divested from the messy realities of history, such as the likelihood that her implied audience, addressed earlier as “my American friend,” will continue to regard the typical immigrant as a “greasy alien” (144). The very emptiness of the American scene that James finds so unbearable is liberating to Antin. As a metonymy for the kind of assimilation that Antin herself has enacted by marrying a native-born professor of natural history, nature further serves as a displacement of the highly untypical closure that her story has actually achieved. The autobiographical fact of intermarriage creates a link between ethnic and American that Antin clearly sees as a continuity so criminal, in the context of her narrative, that it has to be disguised by means of yet another syntagmatic substitution. As the Jamesian expression “criminal continuity” reminds us, James too proves unable to resist continuities of his own – with an American landscape whose seductively syntagmatic force infects his style; with ethnic others whose European perspective interferes with his efforts to feel at one with the cultural

31. Bergland 75.

32. Sollors xlv.

33. Sollors xv.

34. The rate of Jewish in-marriage around the turn of the century was almost 99 per cent according to Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964) 181.

riches of his native country; with a European sensibility of his own that turns out just as persistent in disabling any unadulterated appreciation of those riches. Yet, while on James's American scene the ethnic American functions as a disturbing element with whom the native-born must admit an affinity grudgingly, if at all, in Antin's promised land it is paradoxically the native-born American who must be excluded from the picture so as to maintain the integrity of the ethnic American's autonomous accession to full citizenship (while at the same time the ethnic immigrant that is Antin's mother must be reduced to a mere foil). The American natural scene here serves as a tropological tool that enables Antin's narrative at once to retain an intimate link with the territory from which it has emerged and to screen the precise character of her connection to the promised land.