



SPRING/SUMMER 2019

ARION

A JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND THE CLASSICS

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Little Eternities: Henry James's Horatian Sense of Time

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Summer's lease hath all too short a date.

—Shakespeare, Sonnet 18

ON A VISIT to Bodiam Castle in Sussex in 1908, Henry James remarked to Edith Wharton: “Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.”¹ The potency of those two words derives from their immediate evocation of an arrested moment between the day’s halcyon perfection and its imminent dying fall. Small wonder that those same words were later used to mythologize an Edenic Edwardian England poised on the brink of war, to preserve in aspic the fancy of a gilded innocence and order, and the promise of “blue remembered hills,”² careless of the teeming, tumultuous reality of an England already in the shadow of the Tree of Knowledge. James’s masterpiece of 1881, *The Portrait of a Lady*, begins with a luxuriously redolent depiction of a summer afternoon, of the hours before dusk that constitute a pleasurable little eternity, of the languorous rhythms and rituals of what Disraeli called “the sustained splendour of [a] stately life.”³

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do,—the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime. The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I should

call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon. Part of the afternoon had waned, but much of it was left, and what was left was of the finest and rarest quality. Real dusk would not arrive for many hours; but the flood of summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf. They lengthened slowly, however, and the scene expressed that sense of leisure still to come which is perhaps the chief source of one's enjoyment of such a scene at such an hour. From five o'clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure.⁴

This passage, it strikes me, is essentially Horatian in its Epicurean delight in the passing moment. For the Augustan poet Horace, this delight, which is intrinsically elegiac, is expressed in the sympotic pleasures of wine and friendship, in the freedom *aestivam sermone benigno tendere noctem* ("to prolong the summer night with genial conversation," *Epistles* 1.5.11). For Henry James, it rests in "the ceremony known as afternoon tea," in the lengthening shadows on an English lawn by "the reedy, silvery Thames" (*PL* 32). In both cases the evanescence of these simple pleasures is deeply felt and pleasure itself heightened by an undertone of melancholy, by a nostalgic apprehension of the present.

LOCI AMOENI

IN HIS REVIEW of Augustus J. C. Hare's *Days near Rome* (1875), Henry James commented: "The smallest pretext for quoting from Horace—the most quotable of the ancients—should always be cultivated."⁵ His own facility for quoting from Horace was evident from his earliest published works, and belied an "extraordinarily haphazard and promiscuous" education shuttling, at his father's restless instigation, between New England, Britain and Continental Europe.⁶ James's biographer, Leon Edel, recorded the family legend that William James (Henry's Irish grandfather), "who was eighteen in 1789, when he set foot in the New World,

brought with him a ‘very small sum of money,’ a Latin grammar and a desire to visit the fresh battlefields of the Revolutionary War.”⁷ Young Henry’s instruction in Latin grammar seems to have begun in the Old World, under a private tutor in London in 1855, a Scotsman named Robert Thomson who later ran a small school in Edinburgh attended by Robert Louis Stevenson. It certainly continued at the Reverend W. C. Leverett’s Berkeley Institute in Newport, Rhode Island where his friend and classmate Thomas Sargent Perry (subsequently the author of *A History of Greek Literature*) said they “read together . . . a very fair amount of Latin literature. Like Shakespeare he had less Greek.”⁸ In 1859 James was enrolled in the Institut Rochette, a “severely mathematical” technical school in Geneva,⁹ but by Easter of the following year he had withdrawn from all of his classes except French, Latin and German. In Bonn, in the summer of 1860, James and his brother Wilky were installed with Dr. Humpert, a Gymnasium professor of Latin and Greek, in Humpert’s family home near the birthplace of Beethoven. When James entered Harvard Law School in September 1862, he focused, Elizabeth Block tells us, “on Horace, Livy, Cicero, and Latin Composition.”¹⁰

Quite apart from an accumulation of useful Horatian tags, which his eclectic classical education provided, James the writer shares with Horace interesting similarities of aesthetic creed and temperament. I shall here mention two. Much has been written about James’s “painterly” style and indeed, along with Balzac, he is probably the nineteenth-century novelist who best exemplifies the Horatian doctrine *ut pictura poesis* (“as is painting, so is poetry”) voiced in *Ars Poetica* (l.361). That the painterly perspective was for James a conscious method is clear from a notebook entry he made on 25 April 1894 concerning his plans for a short story (“The Coxon Fund”): “The formula for the presentation of it in 20,000 words is to make it an Impression—as one of Sargent’s pictures is an impression. That is, I must do it from my own point of view—that of an imagined observer, participa-

tor, chronicler. I must picture it, summarize it, impressionize it, in a word—compress and confine it by making it the picture of what I see.”¹¹

At the beginning of *Satires* 11.6, Horace proclaims of his Sabine farm, a gift from the gods as well as his patron Maecenas:

Hoc erat in votis: modus agri non ita magnus,
hortus ubi et tecto vicinus iugis aquae fons
et paulum silvae super his foret. auctius atque
di melius fecere. bene est. nil amplius oro,
Maia nate, nisi ut propria haec mihi munera faxis.

This is what I prayed for!—a piece of land not so very large, where there would be a garden, and near the house a spring of ever-flowing water, and above these a bit of woodland. More and better than this have the gods done for me. I am content. Nothing more do I ask,
son of Maia, save that you make these blessings last my life long.

And at *Odes* 11.18.14, he declares himself *satis beatus unicis Sabinis* (“sufficiently blessed in my singular Sabine holdings”). In “the blest, the invaluable, little old refuge-quality of dear L.H. [Lamb House]”¹² in the Cinque port of Rye, Sussex, Henry James found his own form of Sabine retreat from the burdens of the metropolis. He spent much of the last two decades of his life there, and with its “goodly old red-walled garden”¹³ it was the domestic incarnation of those cherished words “summer afternoon.” Horace’s Sabine farm was his *locus amoenus* and came to symbolize a moral purity and a source of poetic sustenance removed from the corrupting trivialities of Rome. James, too, attributes to his Sabine refuge moral virtues, referring to Lamb House as though it were a human object of devotion. In September 1900, he wrote to Morton Fullerton: “All this little land is lovely roundabout. It’s really an attaching, really in its quiet way, a quite adorable corner of the wicked earth. And the earth is so wicked just now. Only Lamb House is

mild; only Lamb House is sane; only Lamb House is true.”¹⁴ And a month later, to Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, he reported: “I have hugged this hermitage—& this hermitage only! . . . letting the wave of reaction against a cycle of Cathay (by which I mean 20 years of London) carry me as far [as] it would & spend itself as slowly.”¹⁵



Fig. 1: Under the cherry tree at Lamb House, East Sussex.
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PORTRAITISTS OF TIME

ABOVE ALL—and perhaps not unrelated to their shared Sabine disposition—Horace and Henry James share a profound sense of time. Horace’s famous injunction in *Odes* 1.11, *carpe diem* (“pluck the fruitfulness of the day”), a core tenet of Epicureanism, finds an equivalent in what Carl Maves defined as James’s “sensuous pessimism,” “the poignance of a beauty both transient and uniquely precious.”¹⁶ As Denis Feeney has said, Horace is “a great poet of time” and, for all his elegant qualities of ironic observation, able to create “an unforgettable atmosphere of nostalgia and loss.”¹⁷ What is more,

Feeney points out, his conception of *innumerabilis / annorum series et fuga temporum* (“the uncountable sequence of years and the flight of ages,” *Odes* III.30.4–5)—his “mode of apprehending time as an organised grid through which natural time flows, or flies”—is fundamentally Roman (and specifically Julian) and beyond the reckoning of his Greek lyric precursors.¹⁸ “A sonnet is a moment’s monument,”¹⁹ declared Dante Gabriel Rossetti, echoing Horace’s *exegi monumentum*. Part of what makes Horace a great poet of time is his vivid memorialization of the fleeting moment, the creation of “Jamesian” little eternities—not least soft whisperings in the twilight corners of the Campus Martius on a mid-summer’s night:

nunc et campus et areae
lenesque sub noctem susurri
composita repetantur hora,

nunc et latentis proditor intimo
gratus puellae risus ab angulo
pignusque dereptum lacertis
aut digito male pertinaci.

(*Odes* I.9.18–24)

Now let the Campus and the squares
be sought and soft whisperings approaching
nightfall at the appointed hour,

now also the delightful laughter, betrayer
of a girl hidden by the inmost corner
and the token snatched from her arms
or finger scarcely unyielding.

The Campus Martius is the setting for another lingering vignette of arrested time within a broader contemplation of time’s flight—the vision of the young athlete Ligurinus who haunts the middle-aged poet’s dreams, giving lie to his *renuntiatio amoris*:

nocturnis ego somniis
 iam captum teneo, iam volucrem sequor
 te per gramina Martii
 Campi, te per aquas, dure, volubilis.

(*Odes* IV.1.37–40)

In dreams by night I
 now hold you caught, now follow you
 flying over the grass of the Campus
 Martius, [follow] you through the whirling waves, o pitiless one.

Like Horace, Henry James is a master portraitist of time, its heft and fleetingness, of what Graham Greene termed “that dark backward and abysm that is the novelist’s abiding problem.”²⁰ Significantly, it is in the guise of both a sentimental and a brooding tourist through Italy, and in his fiction set in Rome, that James’s Horatian sense of time and transience, and his Horatian nostalgia for the present, is most movingly articulated. Jacek Gutorow has commented: “the Italian experience was for James not only a process of gathering impressions, but also an experience of the temporality of this process . . . Italy became for James an accumulation of different times—the time measured by clocks, the time of one’s own experiences, the time of memories, the time lost on the way.”²¹ Gazing out across the Bay of Naples from Sorrento, James could feel the present “sigh with the strange elusive sounds of Virgil and Theocritus.”²² On a brief excursion to Lake Como, he could believe that he too “was a hero of romance with leisure for a love-affair, and not a hurrying tourist with a Bradshaw in his pocket.”²³ And against the backdrop of the Eternal City, James the novelist could best capture and distil the essence of his little eternities, bringing the stuff of a moment into intimate relationship with the monumental.

A ROMAN NOSTOS

IN ITALY, and especially in Rome, James discovered a spiritual homeland that offered the sort of cultural rootedness

and stimuli he felt were lacking in the country of his birth. Even before his first visit in 1869, at the age of twenty-six, he had developed an imaginative connection with the Roman past. Ethel Goodstein notes that James's childhood home in Manhattan "was a cosmopolitan enclave in which Italy was the main ingredient in a recipe for securing the refinements of high culture in ugly American cities where—during the decades that preceded the Civil War—there was little distinguished architecture and few collections of important art."²⁴ Paradoxically, it was this imaginative connection to ancient and Renaissance Rome that helped him (and often the characters in his stories) to define what it was to be American. As an American he believed himself uniquely placed to absorb other, older civilizations and to create, in effect, his own notion of Home. As he explained to Thomas Sargent Perry:

I think that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilisation not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc.) claim our property wherever we find it.²⁵

Having laid claim to a home of his own intellectual choosing and construction, he was susceptible to "a strange, inverted home-sickness"²⁶ for Rome such as came upon that "prophet of neo-classicism" Johann Winckelmann, who categorized himself as "one of those whom the Greeks call ὀψιμαθείς. I have come into the world and into Italy too late."²⁷ And like Winckelmann, he would experience "the intoxication of belatedness."²⁸ He recognized that Rome, with its richly layered history, was an inherently nostalgic place and that one's response to it "rarely begins and ends with itself; it reverberates—it recalls, commemorates, resuscitates something else."²⁹ Seamus Heaney could have been diagnosing James's particular *mal du pays* when he observed: "a connection is possible between your present self and your intuited previousness, between your inchoate dailiness and

your imagined identity.”³⁰ In a letter to his brother William, James spoke of his first revelatory encounter with Rome as a rebirth, an ecstatic initiation, and at the same time a *nostos* (homecoming):

Here I am then in the Eternal City. . . . At last—for the first time—I live! . . . I went reeling and moaning thro’ the streets, in a fever of enjoyment. In the course of four or five hours I traversed almost the whole of Rome and got a glimpse of everything. . . . I have looked along the grassy vista of the Appian Way & seen the top-most stonework of the Coliseum sitting shrouded in the light of heaven, like the edge of an Alpine chain. I’ve trod the Forum & I have scaled the Capitol. I’ve seen the Tiber hurrying along, as swift & dirty as history! . . . In fine I’ve seen Rome, & I shall go to bed a wiser man than I last rose—yesterday morning.³¹

By the time of his second visit in 1872, two years after the final phase of the Risorgimento was completed, this fevered enjoyment acquired a more complex nostalgic dimension or, as Maves perceives it, “the deep hues of a photograph much exposed to light; increasingly the ‘sensuous optimism’ evoked by the Italy of appearances is suffused with darker elements, with the sadness of increased experience and the sadness of unappeasable yearnings.”³² In his 1878 essay “Italy Revisited,” James foresaw with clarity and distaste the impingements of “an Italy united and prosperous, but altogether commercial.”³³ He urged the traveller who has “worked off the primal fermentation of his relish” for the picturesque to consider for a while Italy’s modernity, to consider also that the old Italy had increasingly become a museum, a romantic idea detached from the prosaic, progressive present.³⁴ And yet he ends his inventory of modern infelicities with a lyrical backward glance at the picturesque. From Spezia’s unlovely newness he takes a boat to the bay of Lerici and “the now desolate little villa in which Shelley spent the last months of his short life.”³⁵ Having previously conjured an unsettling vision of the coming years and now another of the English poet’s idyllic sojourn in the early part

of the century, James produces a characteristic little eternity of pleasure—not a summer afternoon but “a perfect autumn afternoon”:

the half-hour's station on the little battered terrace of the villa; the climb to the singularly picturesque old castle that hangs above Lerici; the meditative lounge, in the fading light, upon the vine-decked platform that looked out toward the sunset and the darkening mountains, and, far below, upon the quiet sea, beyond which the pale-faced villa stared up at the brightening moon.³⁶

Here, in true Horatian fashion, he invokes the theme of *carpe diem* through the romantic ruins imbued with the spirit of Shelley who, like his lyric predecessor Catullus, died in his thirtieth year. He elegizes not only what has been but what is—the beauty of the half-hour he is experiencing, a beauty made more resonant by melancholic insight. Less than three weeks before he drowned in the bay of Lerici, Shelley, who, though an avid Hellenist, knew his Horace well, wrote to John Gisborne:

I have a boat here . . . Williams is captain and we drive along this delightful bay in the evening wind, under the summer moon, until earth appears another world. Jane brings her guitar, and if the past and future could be obliterated, the present would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment “Remain, thou, thou are so beautiful.”³⁷

THE HOUR WHICH SNATCHES THE NOURISHING DAY

CARPE DIEM is an important leitmotif of James's writing, including his personal correspondence. As a young man of twenty-one, he adapts the closing lines of *Odes* I.11 in a letter to his distant cousin, Katherine Rogers: “Isn't the future all before us? Let us revel in the blissful present which glides insidiously away even while I trace these crooked characters.”³⁸ He reproduces the idea of sympotic revelry and retains, or recreates, Horace's urgent temporal clause (*dum loquimur*).

vina liques et spatio brevi
 spem longam reseces. dum loquimur, fugerit invida
 aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.
 (Odes 1.11.6–8)

Strain your wine, and within short limits
 prune long hope. Even while we speak, envious time
 has fled: pluck the day, trusting as little as possible in the future.

Bookending James's youthful call to embrace the blissful present is his letter to Hugh Walpole on 21 August 1913, written from the perspective of age and experience: "We must know, as much as possible, in our beautiful art, yours and mine, what we are talking about—and the only way to know is to have lived and loved and cursed and floundered and enjoyed and suffered. I think I don't regret a single 'excess' of my responsive youth—I only regret, in my chilled age, certain occasions and possibilities I didn't embrace."³⁹ Here he echoes Lambert Strether, the diffident hero of *The Ambassadors*, whose *carpe diem* outburst to the artist Little Bilham takes place appropriately in a garden:

Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had? . . . it's as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the



Fig. 2: John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925), Henry James, 1913. Oil on canvas, 33½ in. x 26½ in. (851 mm x 673 mm). © National Portrait Gallery, London. Bequeathed by Henry James, 1916.

gumption to know it was there. Now I hear its faint receding whistle miles and miles down the line. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. . . . Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don't be, like me, without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it; I don't quite know which. . . . Do what you like so long as you don't make my mistake. For it was a mistake. Live!⁴⁰

The failure to heed this imperative is given powerful expression in two of James's shorter works set largely in Italy. The eponymous young heroine of the novella *Daisy Miller*, as her floral name implies, is an exuberant, if unreflective, disciple of *carpe diem*, but she fatally contracts "Roman fever" (malaria) on a late-night tryst in the Colosseum and is buried, like Keats and Shelley, in the Protestant Cemetery. It is here, in "an angle of the wall of imperial Rome, beneath the cypresses and the thick spring-flowers,"⁴¹ that Daisy's would-be suitor Winterbourne begins too late to understand the innocence of her character and how he has allowed scruple and suspicion to diminish his faith in her. Such missed opportunity, the sense of *temps perdu*, pervades "The Diary of a Man of Fifty," which appeared immediately after *Daisy Miller* and is in some ways its sequel. The narrator is like a middle-aged Winterbourne; his "tragedy" is encapsulated in his very first journal entry as he muses on the happiness of rediscovering the Italy of his youth and the nostalgic curiosity it occasions for what might have been:

Florence, April 5th, 1874.—They told me I should find Italy greatly changed; and in seven-and-twenty years there is room for changes. But to me everything is so perfectly the same that I seem to be living my youth over again; all the forgotten impressions of that enchanting time come back to me. . . . They are like the lines of a letter written in sympathetic ink; hold the letter to the fire for a while and the grateful warmth brings out the invisible words. It is the warmth of this yellow sun of Florence that has been restoring the text of my own young romance; the thing has been lying before me today as a clear, fresh page. . . . I have led too serious a life . . . Of course it's a great gain to have had an escape, not to have com-

mitted an act of thumping folly; and I suppose that, whatever serious step one might have taken at twenty-five, after a struggle, and with a violent effort, and however one's conduct might appear to be justified by events, there would always remain a certain element of regret; a certain sense of loss lurking in the sense of gain; a tendency to wonder, rather wishfully, what might have been. What might have been, in this case, would, without doubt, have been very sad, and what has been has been very cheerful and comfortable; but there are nevertheless two or three questions I might ask myself. Why, for instance, have I never married—why have I never been able to care for any woman as I cared for that one? Ah, why are the mountains blue and why is the sunshine warm? Happiness mitigated by impertinent conjectures—that's about my ticket.⁴²

In 1909 James published *Italian Hours*, a collection of travel essays spanning nearly forty years. It ends with a stop at the small town of Velletri, south of Rome, an unpromising place on the surface but somehow transfigured in “the warm waning light of June” so that “we lay at our ease in the bosom of the past, we practised intimacy, in short, an intimacy so much greater than the mere accidental and ostensible” (*IH* 320). Part of the genius of Henry James and Horace is that they establish an intimacy between individual consciousness—the stuff of a moment in historical terms—and that which outlasts us. The private psychology of grief or rapture is set beside, but never submerged by, the sweep of human history and the recurring sequence of the seasons. In *Odes* iv.7, for example, a poem that A. E. Housman regarded as the most beautiful in ancient literature,⁴³ Horace stresses the rapacious progress of natural time (*annus et alnum / quae rapit hora diem*, “the year and the hour which snatches the nourishing day,” 7–8) and a royal lineage of dust and shadow (*nos ubi decidimus / quo pater Aeneas, quo dives Tullus et Ancus, / pulvis et umbra sumus*, “we, when we have sunk down to where dutiful Aeneas, to where rich Tullus and Ancus have gone, are dust and shadow,” 14–16), but he ends with a memorable tableau of personal love and loss:

nec Lethaea valet Theseus abrumpere caro
vincula Pirithoo. (27–28)

nor has Theseus the strength to break the Lethean
chains from his dear Pirithous.

These final lines, which had particular resonance for that unrequited elegiac lover Housman, reinforce the cruel disjunction between natural and human parameters of time, between the cyclic and the finite. But the disjunction itself somehow provides both perspective and consolation. What is large and unstoppable is suddenly and poignantly focused down to a specific instance of human feeling and fragility.

Something very similar is at work in *The Portrait of a Lady*, in which young American heiress Isabel Archer, “an insatiate soul like Ulysses, who wants to see, know and explore the mysteries of life,”⁴⁴ ends up manoeuvred into a calamitous marriage and shackled by “the observance of a magnificent form” (PL 531). Late in the novel, Isabel reflects upon “the ruin of her happiness” (511) amid the ruins of the Roman Campagna where she experiences not only a tragic *anagnorisis* but also a tender communion with the past. Her suffering is translated, as Robert Frost might have said, to “a higher plane of regard.”⁴⁵ She achieves an intimacy, “a companionship in endurance” (PL 511), with Rome’s decaying marmoreal grandeur and finds sober solace in Time’s continuum.

She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter’s day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. She had become deeply, tenderly acquainted with Rome; it interfused and moderated her passion. But she had grown to think of it chiefly as

the place where people had suffered. . . . On such occasions she had several resorts; the most accessible of which perhaps was a seat on the low parapet which edges the wide grassy space before the high, cold front of Saint John Lateran, whence you look across the Campagna at the far-trailing outline of the Alban Mount and at that mighty plain, between, which is still so full of all that has passed from it. . . . she felt the touch of a vanished world. (511-12)



Fig. 3: Thomas Cole (American, 1801-1848), *Roman Campagna*, 1843. Oil on canvas, 32½ x 48 in. (82.6 x 121.9 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. Bequest of Clara Hinton Gould, 1948.189. Photography: Allen Phillips / Wadsworth Atheneum.

SUMMER NIGHTS AND TIME'S WARM ENIGMA

I BEGAN with James's depiction, in *Portrait's* opening scene, of "the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon," describing its elegiac delight in the passing hour as essentially Horatian. I turn now to W. H. Auden's depiction, half a century later, of a perfect summer night that is also Horatian in essence. Auden came to poetic maturity during the Long

Weekend (to borrow Robert Graves's evocative phrase for the interwar period). In the *Odes* of Horace he identified the voice of a kindred soul, a model by which to formulate an honest, vigorous and nuanced response to his own Age of Anxiety. His poem "Out on the lawn I lie in bed" (renamed "A Summer Night") alludes to *Odes* II.1, which Horace addressed to the historian Asinius Pollio, but what makes it truly Horatian is the way Auden's awareness of time and history's menacing momentum brings more sharply into focus a vignette of evanescent perfection. He wrote it after experiencing an epiphany or, as he said, a "vision of *agape*" (divine love), one night in June 1933 when he was seated with teaching colleagues on the lawn of the Downs School in Malvern, savouring the sympotic contentment of free and friendly talk in the temperate air.⁴⁶

Equal with colleagues in a ring
 I sit on each calm evening
 Enchanted as the flowers
 The opening light draws out of hiding
 With all its gradual dove-like pleading,
 Its logic and its powers . . .

And, gentle, do not care to know,
 Where Poland draws her eastern bow,
 What violence is done,
 Nor ask what doubtful act allows
 Our freedom in this English house,
 Our picnics in the sun.

Soon, soon, through the dykes of our content
 The crumpling flood will force a rent
 And, taller than a tree,
 Hold sudden death before our eyes
 Whose river dreams long hid the size
 And vigours of the sea.⁴⁷

"Out on the lawn I lie in bed" is a prescient requiem for companionable summer nights such as this. It elegizes "this

point in time and space," a cosseted world that seems to transcend time and yet is wholly captive to it. Auden's proleptic nostalgia, nourished by premonitions of the "crumpling flood," is akin to James's "sensuous pessimism." In *Italian Hours*, James recalls the midwinter light on the Campagna, during his first Roman ride, as "full of that mellow purple glow, that tempered intensity, which haunts the aftervisions of those who have known Rome like the memory of some supremely irresponsible pleasure." He pictures the country rolling "away around me into slopes and dells of long-drawn grace . . . It was so bright and yet so sad, so still and yet so charged, to the supersensuous ear, with the murmur of an extinguished life" (*IH* 139–40). Auden, in his summer meditation, lingers lovingly but guiltily over a vanishing present, a privileged Englishness, a walled paradise whose occupants, complacent in their "river dreams," are complicit in their own extinction.

There is another interwar description of a glorious summer's evening that is distinctly Horatian and Jamesian in its intense nostalgia for the ephemeral and which carries with it some intuition of Auden's "crumpling flood." It is by Neville Cardus, a largely self-taught celebrant of cricket, classical music and eternal Englishness:

There [at Dover], one late August afternoon, I said good-bye to a cricket season on a field which lay silent in the evening sunshine; the match, the last of the year was over and the players gone. I stayed for a while in the failing light and saw birds run over the grass as the mists began to spread. That day we had watched Woolley in all his glory, batting his way through a hundred felicitous runs. While he batted, the crowd sat with white tents and banners all round—a blessed scene, wisps of clouds in the sky, green grass for our feet to tread upon, "laughter of friends under an English heaven." It was all over and gone now, as I stood on the little field alone in the glow of the declining day.⁴⁸

Cardus, whom the *Manchester Guardian* once compared to Homer,⁴⁹ was a disciple of Walter Pater's aesthetic ideal

“[to] burn always with this hard, gemlike flame”⁵⁰ and found in Pater’s exquisite prose “the articulation of moment-by-moment experience fully relished.”⁵¹ His Paterian relish of a memorable innings being played “to the strain of summer’s cadence” reaches a crescendo in his invocation of Rupert Brooke’s “English heaven” and thus renders his paean to the passing moment pleasurably melancholic. As an “impressionist,” one invested in the art of seizing the passing moment, Pater anticipated Henry James. James had first encountered Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in Florence in 1873, mentioning it in a travel essay the following year and echoing its language in his debut novel *Roderick Hudson*. Four months after Pater’s death, in a letter to Edmund Gosse, James described Pater as “not of the little day—but of the longer time,”⁵² thereby pinpointing a particularly Horatian paradox: the timelessness of art that captures individual moments in the great tide of transience.

This paradox is at the heart of Auden’s belated elegy for Henry James, composed twenty-five years after the novelist’s death. “At the Grave of Henry James” first appeared as a twenty-eight-stanza poem in the wartime magazine *Horizon*.⁵³ Monroe Spears dubbed it a “virtuoso exercise in sympathetic parody”⁵⁴ as it contains paraphrases and syntactical imitations of James, but the opening stanzas call to mind Horace’s “spring” odes, I.4 (*Solvitur acris hiems*) and IV.7 (*Diffugere nives*). Auden contrasts, as Horace does, *vitae summa brevis*, the silent, lapidary finality of the grave, with the death and resurrection of the seasons.

The snow, less intransigent than their marble,
Has left the defence of whiteness to these tombs;
For all the pools at my feet
Accommodate blue, now, and echo such clouds as occur
To the sky, and whatever bird or mourner the passing
Moment remarks they repeat.

While the rocks, named after singular spaces

Within which images wandered once that caused
 All to tremble and offend,
 Stand here in an innocent stillness, each marking the spot
 Where one more series of errors lost its uniqueness
 And novelty came to an end.

Auden, who knew how writers in their solitary quest “need the companionship / of our good dead,”⁵⁵ apostrophizes James’s shade with the Roman epithet “stern proconsul of intractable provinces.” His modernist forerunner, Ezra Pound, once located James’s greatness as a novelist in “the magnitude of the forces he analysed and portrayed.”⁵⁶ Of these forces, or intractable provinces, perhaps none was greater than Time, “time that is,” as Auden pronounced in his graveside tribute, “A warm enigma.”

NOTES

1. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York 1934), 249.
2. From A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* (“Into my heart an air that kills”).
3. Benjamin Disraeli, *Tancred: or, The New Crusade* (London 1847), 24.
4. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (Oxford 2009), 19.
5. Henry James, “Days near Rome, by A. J. C. Hare,” *The Nation* 20 (April 1875), 229.
6. Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James*, vol. 1 (London 1920), 3.
7. Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York 1985), 3.
8. Lubbock (note 6), 8.
9. Lubbock (note 6), 5.
10. Elizabeth Block, “The Rome of Henry James,” in *Roman Images: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1982*, ed. Annabel Patterson (Baltimore 1984), 155.
11. F. O. Matthiesson and Kenneth B. Murdock, eds, *The Notebooks of Henry James* (Chicago 1981), 160.
12. Letter to James’s nephew “Harry,” 16 July 1912. Percy Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James*, vol. 2 (London 1920), 248.
13. Letter to Mrs William James, 1 December 1897. Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: Letters*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA 1984), 62.
14. Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: Selected Letters* (Cambridge, MA 1987), 324.

15. Mark DeWolfe Howe, "The Letters of Henry James to Mr Justice Holmes," *Yale Review* 38 (March 1949), 422.

16. Carl Maves, *Sensuous Pessimism: Italy in the Work of Henry James* (Bloomington 1973), 59.

17. Denis Feeney, "Horace and the Greek Lyric Poets," in *Horace: Odes and Epodes*, ed. Michele Lowrie (2009), 227.

18. Note 17, 229.

19. From "The Sonnet" (1881): "A Sonnet is a moment's monument, / Memorial from the Soul's eternity / To one dead deathless hour . . ."

20. Graham Greene, *Collected Essays* (London 1969), 54.

21. Jacek Gutorow, "Figures of Fulfillment: James and 'a Sense of Italy,'" in *Henry James's Europe: Heritage and Transfer*, ed. Dennis Tredy, Annick Duperray and Adrian Harding (Cambridge 2011), 97.

22. Henry James, *Italian Hours*, ed. John Auchard (New York 1995), 311.

23. Note 22, 86–87.

24. Ethel S. Goodstein, "Rome According to Henry James: The Lure of the City and the American Imagination," *La Città Nuova* (ACSA International Conference 1999), 172.

25. 20 September 1867. Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: Selected Letters* (Cambridge, MA 1987), 15.

26. Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London 1873), 166.

27. Note 26, 159.

28. See Harold Bloom, "Walter Pater: the Intoxication of Belatedness," *Yale French Studies* 50 (1974), 163–89.

29. Henry James, *Italian Hours*, ed. John Auchard (New York 1995), 149.

30. Seamus Heaney, "Correspondences: Emigrants and Inner Exiles," in *Migrations: The Irish at Home and Abroad*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin 1990), 29.

31. 30 October 1869. Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: Selected Letters* (Cambridge, MA 1987), 54–55.

32. Carl Maves, *Sensuous Pessimism: Italy in the Work of Henry James* (Bloomington 1973), 59.

33. Henry James, "Italy Revisited," *Atlantic Monthly* 41 (April 1878), 440.

34. Note 33, 439.

35. Note 33, 443.

36. Note 33, 444.

37. Frederick L. Jones, ed., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2. (Oxford 1964), 435–36.

38. 23 January 1865. P. A. Walker and G. W. Zacharias, eds., *The Complete Letters of Henry James, 1855–1872*, vol. 1 (Lincoln 2006), 117.

39. Edel (note 13), 680.
40. Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. Christopher Butler (Oxford 1998), 153–54.
41. Henry James, *Daisy Miller and An International Episode*, ed. Adrian Poole (Oxford 2013), 64.
42. Henry James, *The Madonna of the Future and Other Tales*, vol. 2 (London 1879), 92–95.
43. See Richard Perceval Graves's account of the morning in May 1914 when Housman, lecturing at Cambridge, "read the ode aloud with deep emotion first in Latin, and then in an English translation of his own," A. E. Housman: *The Scholar Poet* (New York 1979), 172.
44. Bhawani Dutta Roy, "The Portrait of a Lady: An American Classic Revisited," *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* 1.2 (2009), 168.
45. When asked in Israel in 1961 why he believed in education, Frost replied: "It lifts trouble and sorrow to a higher plane of regard."
46. In his "Introduction" to Anne Fremantle's *The Protestant Mystics* (1964), Auden recalled: "We were talking casually about everyday matters when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, something happened. I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly—because, thanks to the power, I was doing it—what it meant to love one's neighbor as oneself." Reprinted in W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords* (New York 1973), 69.
47. W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London 2007), 117–18.
48. Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Essential Neville Cardus* (London 1949), 19.
49. "Where would Homer's gods and heroes, in any case, be without Homer, now?" mused the reviewer of *The Essential Neville Cardus*, *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (28 July 1949), 12.
50. Pater (note 26), 197.
51. Robin Daniels, "Walter Pater and Neville Cardus," *Contemporary Review* 292 (Summer 2010), 206.
52. 13 December 1894. Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: Letters*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA 1980), 492.
53. *Horizon*, June 1941, 379–83.
54. Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (New York 1963), 199.
55. In 1964, Auden published an elegy for Louis MacNeice, "The Cave of Making," in which he addressed MacNeice, a fellow disciple of Horace, by the classical epithet "dear Shade" and—because MacNeice knows "our mystery / from the inside and therefore / how much, in our lonely dens, we need the companionship / of our good dead"—entreated him "to stay at my elbow / until cocktail time."
56. Ezra Pound, "Henry James," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.



