AMERICA AND INNOCENCE

Henry James and Graham Greene

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SEVENTY-SEVEN years separate the publication of *Daisy Miller*, by Henry James, from that of *The Quiet American*, by Graham Greene. With *Daisy Miller* James made the closest approach in his lifetime to the kind of popular acclaim now enjoyed by Greene; the novel is one of his simplest, and the workings of its author's mind are revealed in skeletal clarity. The transformation in the significance of America and in the writing of novels which has appeared during that time make it startling that the two books should share something of a common attitude to Americans as symbols. The changes of the intervening three-quarters of a century have naturally had their effect on this symbolic use; the position of America in the world has changed, and the value of the symbol has correspondingly altered from that presented by James. Nevertheless there is a similarity, and it seems that Americans abroad can still provide material for an imaginative examination of society and human motives.

James's ambivalent attitude to his native country is, of course, widely demonstrated throughout his novels. Always he finds it difficult to reconcile his admiration for the forthrightness, vigour and pragmatism of a young country, with a feeling of its inferiority before the majestical sweep of European history and the society with which he sees that history so intimately twined. The arts and politics of Europe are superb monuments of humanity, but at the same time there is in them a subtle threat, a danger that their greatness dominates the life of the present and cows it into submission to a dead past. Into this world enter the young Americans, Roderick Hudson, Christopher Newman, Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer. Their conflicts with the subtleties and intrigues of Europe form the substance of the novels in which they appear.

There is a great distance between Daisy Miller, the American girl touring Europe, and Alden Pyle, the member of an economic mission to French Indo-China almost a century later; yet there is something common in their approach to the societies in which they find themselves. Daisy Miller resents and opposes the conventions which she sees governing the private lives of Europeans; Pyle is a cruder, more active missionary (as *The Quiet American* is a cruder and more violent book) not merely critical of his surroundings but determined to affect them positively, through his membership of a disguised political agency. He arrives primed with lectures and York Harding's books and forces all he finds into his prepared mould. 'He never saw anything', Fowler remarks of him after his death, 'he hadn't heard in a lecture hall.'

Daisy Miller and Pyle are both examples of American innocence loosed among the tangles of an older and more complex world. The situation is at least as old as Mark Twain, whose *Innocents Abroad* appeared in 1869, but with James and Greene its possibilities are so purposively developed that a further dimension is revealed. The nationality of the protagonists is still of real importance as reporting; the books on one level deal factually with circumstances which exist in the world in a way not far from that in which they are here described. But it surely becomes clear that the conception of innocence as used by both writers is something more than an observation of Americans, and is a factor to be examined in its own right.

Pyle is not in Europe but the Far East, where the impact of the strangeness and complexities of life is sharper than that of nineteenth-century Europe, though often of the same kind. He is unsympathetic towards the East, and his distrust and zeal to change it are manifested in apparently unimportant details; he induces Phuong to straighten her 'elaborate hairdressing which she thought became the daughter of a mandarin', and he pushes his Vit-Health sandwiches upon the Caodist commandant, having expressed his fears about the local food. The sterile isolation suggested by the latter incident is echoed by the remarks of Fowler about the sterilized world of the American girls in the milk bar, immediately before the explosion of the disastrous bomb. The girls are mere observers, and have the attitude of tourists:

> '"Do you think it's a demonstration?"
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> '"I've seen so many demonstrations", the other said wearily, like a tourist glutted with churches.'

Daisy Miller is the weary tourist, too. In Rome she is pleased only with that part of her own world which she can find there:

> 'I was sure it would be dreadfully poky. I was sure we should be going round all the time with one of those dreadful old men that explain about the pictures and things. But we only had about a week of that, and now I'm enjoying myself.'

Her effect on Roman society is disturbing, if less alarming than that of Pyle's plastic bombs on Saigon, but she like Pyle is killed by a refusal to understand the realities of a different world. In spite of warnings she visits the Colosseum by moonlight, and consequently dies of Roman fever.

Daisy's involvement with Giovanelli, the young Italian, is an affair infected with as much misunderstanding as Pyle's attachment to Phuong. She cannot or will not realize that Giovanelli's English is as fluent as it is because it has been practised upon a great many American heiresses. Pyle refuses to listen to Fowler's attempt brutally to disillusion him, and persists in his gentlemanly behaviour towards both Fowler and Phuong, striving always to live up to his code of 'being fair'. The behaviour of Daisy Miller is more enigmatic, even ambiguous; Winterbourne is never quite sure about her:

> 'It must be admitted that holding oneself to a belief in Daisy's "innocence" came to seem to Winterbourne more and more a matter of fine-spun gallantry. As I have already had occasion to relate, he was angry at finding himself reduced to chopping logic about this young lady; he was vexed at his lack of instinctive certitude as to how far her eccentricities were generic, national, and how far they were personal.'

This paradox of American innocence is repeated by Greene. Pyle is almost ludicrously innocent in his personal relationships and in his intentions. 'I never knew a man', says Fowler, 'with better motives for all the trouble he caused.' Much of the trouble, of course, is caused by a stumbling incomprehension, like the support of General Thé and the 'Third Force'; but the instigation of the bicycle bombs and the single large explosion stems from an innocence as equivocal as Daisy Miller's.

It is this conception of innocence as a paradox which seems central to the understanding of both books. Henry James is concerned with the ancient antithesis of innocence and experience, and skilfully maintains a poise in all his novels which enables him to crystallize the problem and yet to reserve judgment. Greene on the other hand is committed, and his book embodies the view that the modern world holds no place for innocence, which must crumble before reality and involve much in its downfall.

James is inescapably attracted to the evidence of a tested civilization which he finds in Europe, the 'experienced' half of his world. The following description of Rome reveals this attraction and the limitations he felt were intrinsic in it.

> 'A few days after his brief interview with her mother, he encountered her in that beautiful abode of flowering desolation known as the Palace of the Caesars. The early Roman spring had filled the air with bloom and perfume, and the rugged surface of the Palatine was muffled with tender verdure. Daisy was strolling along the top of one of those great mounds of ruin that are embanked with mossy marble and paved with monumental inscriptions. It seemed to him that Rome had never been so lovely as just then. He stood looking off at the enchanting harmony of line and colour that remotely encircles the city, inhaling the softly humid odours and feeling the freshness of the year and the antiquity of the place reaffirm themselves in mysterious interfusion.'

The phrases 'beautiful abode of flowering desolation' and 'mounds of ruin', and the implication of moss on the monuments indicate the twofold approach: enchantment with the beauty, admiration for the achievement, linked with an insistent feeling that all this is past and that it is to the young Daisy Miller walking through it that our attention must be directed. The ideal 'interfusion' between the freshness of youth and the antiquity of man is indeed 'mysterious', and attainable only in glimpses of a rare perception. All James's art tends towards the cultivation and preservation of sensitive perceptions of this kind.

In *Daisy Miller* the Colosseum is for Winterbourne the epitome of European civilization, and he enters it by moonlight the better to appreciate its grandeur. At the moment of deepest admiration, however, he remembers that the atmosphere of the Colosseum is believed to be dangerous to health. The passage is germinal.

> 'The place had never seemed to him more impressive. One half of the gigantic circus was in deep shade; the other was sleeping in the luminous dusk. As he stood there he began to murmur Byron's famous lines from *Manfred*; but before he had finished his quotation he remembered that if nocturnal meditations are recommended by the poets, they are deprecated

> by the doctors. The historic atmosphere was there, certainly; but the historic atmosphere, scientifically considered, was no better than a villainous miasma.'

He is appalled to find Daisy Miller in the middle of the Colosseum, breathing its poisonous atmosphere. Within a couple of days she has Roman fever, and a little over a week later she is dead. Giovanelli pronounces her obituary:

> ' "She was the most beautiful young lady I ever saw, and the most amiable." And he added in a moment, "And the most innocent." '

If a fusion is achieved, it is only through the assimilation of such difficult ideas and experiences, which are squarely faced. James never attempts a facile reconciliation of his reverence for historical grandeur with his feeling that history is stifling, even killing. The power of tradition is in direct opposition to the innocence of youth, contorting it to resemble itself; and since tradition is the experience of previous generations, confused, wrong-headed, often evil, it is the destroyer of innocence. The historical atmosphere is seen as no better than a villainous miasma.

Graham Greene surveys the same conflict from the European end. With him it is innocence which is the destroyer, inimical to institutions which, though imperfect, are the result of the cumulative wisdom of the centuries, and are based on an acceptance of man as he really is. Pyle's innocence is insidious because so deceptive. When he enters the Chinese quarter of Saigon, Fowler's instinct is to protect him:

> 'That was my first instinct—to protect him. It never occurred to me that there was greater need to protect myself. Innocence always calls mutely for protection, when we should be so much wiser to guard ourselves against it: innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world meaning no harm.'

Here 'innocence' is fairly obviously synonymous with 'naivety'. The word (often repeated as in *Daisy Miller*) defines itself during the course of the book, and although it emerges as a complex of several meanings, some are excluded. Naivety is a large part of Pyle's deficiency. When Fowler throws at him a derogatory remark about the Black Prince, his distress is evident and symptomatic. 'I was to see many times that look of pain and disappointment touch his eyes and mouth, when reality didn't match the romantic ideas he cherished. . . .' Sheer ignorance of much of the real world, combined with a reforming zeal in the tradition of the American 'sense of mission', account for his innocence and ineptitude. Freedom from guilt, of course, is another matter, and Pyle's distance from innocence in this sense constitutes the paradox on which the novel is founded.

Daisy Miller's innocence is an honest-eyed directness which challenges restriction. Of Italy she says:

> ' "The young ladies of this country have a dreadfully poky time of it, as far as I can learn; I don't see why I should change my habits for *them*."
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> "I am afraid your habits are those of a flirt", said Winterbourne gravely.
>
> "Of course they are", she cried, giving him her little smiling stare again. "I'm a fearful, frightful flirt. Did you ever hear of a nice girl that was not?" '

She is prepared to live by her own standards, to preserve this uncontaminated kind of innocence, even in the midst of hostile pressures. Her European associates are scandalized, and in the end she is extinguished by the European atmosphere. Innocence had seemed tough enough to survive and conquer, but the establishments of experience have prevailed. The effect of Winterbourne should be noted; of his experience in knowing Daisy he says to his aunt, 'You were right . . . I was booked to make a mistake. I have lived too long in foreign parts.' He was beginning to be contaminated, and has been brought to self-awareness by his encountering American directness once again. But James has no such simple 'message' as this. The passage continues:

> 'Nevertheless he went back to live at Geneva, whence there continue to come the most contradictory accounts of his motives of sojourn: a report that he is "studying hard"—an intimation that he is much interested in a very clever foreign lady.'

For Winterbourne, the appeal of American innocence is limited; he is committed to Europe and experience once more.

Fowler's reaction is not simple either, and with him it is not merely a matter of seeing limitations. He has seen such disaster follow upon the entry of American innocence that he has accepted responsibility for eliminating it, and connived at the murder of Pyle. Only the book from which Pyle drew inspiration for his actions in Indo-China is left.

> 'Opposite me in the bookcase *The Role of the West* stood out like a cabinet portrait—of a young man with a crew cut and a black dog at his heels. He could harm no one any more.'

From now on life is to be uncomplicated by his presence; difficulties disappear, the pieces fall into place. Fowler's wife agrees to divorce him; he is free to marry Phuong. Yet there is something wrong with the apparent solution, as the last sentence of the book indicates: 'Everything had gone right with me since he had died, but how I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry.' There is an added complexity. The murder of innocence has not been simple either, and though it has brought comfort it has also left regret.

Daisy's innocence is tough, obvious and bright, but it succumbs. Pyle's is self-effacing and deadly. Neither can survive; perhaps neither deserves to. The kind of innocence embodied in these two is essentially unreal. In a kind of optimistic humanism they behave as if the world were as they wish it to be, and are broken by the world's intransigence. The point is driven home by Greene with a typical horrific flourish; after the explosion in Saigon Fowler pushes the bewildered Pyle so that he steps into a pool of civilian blood, and tells him, 'You've got the Third Force and National Democracy all over your right shoe.' The discrepancy between slogan and reality is made crudely apparent.

The notion of original sin seems a long way from the private worlds of Daisy Miller and Pyle, and it is in their lack of recognition of the kind of reality suggested by this doctrine that their failure lies. This is their innocence, as futile among the social delicacies of Henry James as in the rough political turmoil of Greene's Indo-China. For each writer, in spite of the vast gap by which they are separated, the American is a valid correlative for innocence thus defined. As the world has changed, so the spheres of operation have altered almost beyond recognition; and it is not suggested that James and Greene have much in common beyond the theme of Greene's *The Quiet American* and their common recognition of evil.[1] The comparison is interesting and valuable because of, not in spite of, the clear differences between the writers and between their worlds. The innocent American of fiction remains with us; but he has become quiet, and dangerous.

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[1] See Greene's two essays on Henry James in *The Lost Childhood* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1951).