It had all been in truth a history — for the imagination that could take it so.

_The American Scene_

It is conventionally agreed that with the three great novels of his so-called ‘major phase’ — *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Golden Bowl* (1904) — Henry James fulfilled and in effect concluded his career as novelist, despite the fact that he lived on until 1916, most of that time in good health, and left at his death such unfinished efforts as *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past*. It is also conventionally assumed that James’s three avowedly autobiographical volumes — *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), *The Middle Years* (1917) — constitute his only deliberate gesture toward autobiography as such, the incompleteness of which (the record breaks off in the mid-1870s at the ‘end’ of the unfinished third book) is to be understood in terms of a life already in effect fully shaped and interpreted through a completed career in art. Whatever the inevitable frequencies with which the novelist employed autobiographical material, or the autobiographer employed novelistic procedure, these two concentrated bursts of narrative energy are taken as separate culminations, artistic and autobiographical, to James’s literary life.

Thus stated, however, this view tends also to reinforce certain conventional assumptions concerning *The American Scene*, the account James published in 1907 of his visit to the United States in 1904–5, after a quarter-century of absence, his only full-length
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narrative published after the novels of 1902–4 and before the autobiographies of 1913–17. These assumptions are both less accurate and less innocuous in their critical convenience than those concerning the late fiction and the formal autobiography, and may be summarized as follows. However delicately James may have recorded his impressions, or registered the ‘character’ of situations in which he places himself as a protagonist of sorts; however astute may have been his sense of the symbolic value as cultural portents of certain features of the immediate American scene; the work as a whole is nonetheless to be read as a casually connected series of travel reminiscences, without additional imaginative design or documentary coherence. Moreover, it is said, as ‘personal narrative’ the book is randomly and often obscurely reflective, rather than in any systematic sense autobiographical. And in any case this volume is generally regarded as incomplete, since a planned sequel, to deal with the Western portion of James’s trip, was never executed.

On the contrary, The American Scene (which James first envisioned as a novel in his established mode with an American setting) may usefully be considered as a kind of novel, in which an author-protagonist re-enacts through interlocking and accumulating ‘scenes’ the journeys of interior discovery undertaken by his fictional protagonists, within an exterior context of a collision of cultures. These scenes, or ‘chapters of experience’ as James refers to them at one point, consist of meditative moments dramatically developed, with James as his own ‘lucid reflector’ at the center of each sequence. The significance of each sequence, be it personal or historical, is discovered by James’s persona and revealed to the reader in an imaginative event — a ‘chapter’ within a larger ‘story’ — and expressed in a corresponding vocabulary. The American Scene contains, indeed, much the same sort of self-scrutiny as to representational method, and much the same sort of language with respect to literary ‘values,’ as the Prefaces James began writing for the New York Edition of the novels as he was completing this book.

The American Scene is also what it more explicitly purports to be: a selective but purposeful documentary ‘report’ on American conditions ca. 1905, culminating in a vision, prophetic and elegaic, of American cultural prospect and retrospect. The commentary contained in this vision is far from a mere restatement of James’s earlier objection to America’s lack of historical atmosphere.