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Henry James and Owen Wister

OWEN WISTER'S best-known novel, *The Virginian*, has been kept constantly before us for nearly seventy years by means of numerous editions, stage productions, films, and, most recently, a popular television series. When we think of Wister at all, therefore, our thoughts tend to be dominated by an image—not so much one of *The Virginian* as one derived from subsequent permutations of *The Virginian*'s ostensible form and subject—an image, in short, of the "Wild Western." Because of this, it is easy to forget that the Philadelphia gentleman who wrote stories about the Wild West was also author of *Lady Baltimore*, the "genteel" novel of Charleston, South Carolina, which, when it first appeared in 1906, nearly everyone immediately recognized as very "Jamesian." Of course, we have not only forgotten that *Wister* wrote *Lady Baltimore*, we have forgotten that anybody wrote it, and the reasons why are plain. First, *Lady Baltimore* was not particularly memorable, whereas *The Virginian* was. Clearly, Wister's most valuable literary achievement was contained in what he wrote about the American West. Second, *Lady Baltimore* was "Jamesian" only in the most superficial sense. Whereas its surface of social maneuvering and involved conversations vaguely resembled the surface of a James novel like *The Spoils of Poynton*, its substance contained nothing of the Jamesian at all.

Yet Wister *was* a very Jamesian writer—nowhere more so than in *The Virginian* itself. The colorful and influential setting of this

novel has effectively obscured for nearly everyone the facts both James and Wister clearly recognized: that the novel's focus and manner corresponded to those of *Roderick Hudson;* that its hero was Christopher Newman of *The American* gone to Wyoming for his health instead of to Europe for culture. If these correspondences were merely coincidental, they would be of little consequence. On the contrary, however, they proceeded directly from a long and complex personal relationship between James and Wister. When *The Virginian* was first published in 1902, the two men had been friends for more than twenty years. By 1882, when they attended opera together in Boston, they were on familiar terms. More than three decades later, in 1914, the friendship had deepened, so that when James wrote to Wister, he addressed him as "Dearest Owen," and spoke of the "intwisted . . . imagination . . . that *we* know" as something which "has hung about you alternately to torment me and to reassure." The "intwisted . . . imagination" which James and Wister held between them contained a body of remarkable assumptions about literature and history. It was directly responsible for much of what both men wrote. Therefore, the series of events which formed it deserves careful examination.

I

The basis for the friendship of James and Wister was established on Christmas evening, 1873, well before the two men ever saw each other. Owen, who was thirteen, had been living for a year with his maternal aunt and her husband at Herford, in England, while his parents and grandmother, the famous Shakespearian actress, Fanny Kemble,[1] toured the continent. James, who was living in Paris, left for Rome on December 18. The Christmas gathering of Americans at Mrs. Henry Russell Cleveland's villa brought James together with Sarah Butler Wister, Owen's mother.

Mrs. Wister was both attractive and intelligent. James, at thirty, represented the cosmopolitan polish which the Americans at Mrs. Cleveland's sought in Europe—without having yet left entirely behind the youth which they also cherished. Mrs. Wister invited James

[1] Frances Anne Kemble married Wister's grandfather, Pierce Butler, later to be divorced from him in a much publicized case. Her readings of Shakespeare's plays helped many Americans, including Herman Melville, to appreciate Shakespeare as they never had before.

to call, and two nights later he did so. The occasion loomed large for James, because it gave him the opportunity to meet Mrs. Wister's accomplished mother, whom he had long admired from afar. Shortly afterward, he described her as "the terrific Kemble herself, whose splendid handsomness of eye, nostril and mouth were the best things in the room."[2] Yet the room also contained another attraction, which James began to discover how much he liked when he went to Colonna Gardens with Mrs. Wister the next day. Describing the experience to his mother, he wrote that "a beautiful woman who takes you to such a place and talks to you uninterruptedly, learnedly, and even cleverly for two whole hours is not to be disposed of in three lines."[3] Indeed she wasn't. For the next three months, James and Mrs. Wister were frequently together. James repeatedly praised his new friend in letters to his mother, who warned him not to become too involved. Leon Edel even suggests that the relationship may have been partly responsible for providing James with the idea for "Madame de Mauves," which tells the story of a young man's unhappy love for a beautiful American married woman. In April, the Wisters and Miss Kemble left Rome for England where Owen joined them and they all sailed for the United States, but the tie with Henry James had been firmly cemented.

That spring, the Wisters moved back into their house near Philadelphia and sent Owen to study at St. Paul's school in New Hampshire. There, he worked hard, read widely, and found time to be "employed every once in a while in making a new language . . . on the model of the Old Saxon."[4] In the fall, Henry James crossed the Atlantic. *Roderick Hudson*, his first novel, began its serial publication in January. James elected to spend the winter in New York, and Wister, at fifteen, began to plan his own first novel. A long letter to his mother written from St. Paul's outlined a fantastic comic opera plot in which political intrigue, murder, love, exploration of darkest Africa, and a tour of the European capitals were all involved. Closing, Wister called the scheme "certainly original," adding that

[2] Henry James, quoted in Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Conquest of London* (New York, 1962), 85.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Wister to Sarah B. Wister, June, 1874. Unless otherwise noted, all manuscripts cited are in the Wister Collection at the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress.

he, at least, "never heard of anything at all like it before."[5] If Sarah Wister told James about the planned novel when he came to visit that fall, he must have been properly amused.

It was the end of September, and the Pennsylvania woods blazed with color when James made his visit. Mrs. Wister charmingly described the event in a letter to Owen, who, after a summer at home, was back at St. Paul's and suffering from homesickness:

> On Tuesday Mr. Henry James came in for a couple of days to say good bye before sailing for Europe, which he does this month, as I was cookless we drove to the park and dined at Strawberry Hill on the piazza & it was perfectly beautiful, day and all. The next afternoon we drove up to Edgehill to the house of Mr. Russell Smith, the painter, where there is a view of forty miles around; the autumn colors are now being mingled with the green in just the proportions that are most beautiful & the day was divine. We dined with your grandmother that night & she read us two of the choruses from Atlanta in Kalydon & recited a long passage of [*illegible*] so we had quite a fine evening. The next day Mr. James went away.[6]

Miss Kemble's reading was so successful that James remembered it vividly nearly twenty years later when he wrote an essay about "the terrific Kemble" after her death in 1893.[7]

Following its successful serialization in *The Atlantic*, *Roderick Hudson*, slightly revised, was published as a book in November, 1875, and the April, 1876, number of *The North American Review* carried Sarah Wister's unsigned essay on that novel. After granting that "Mr. James has imitated nobody," Mrs. Wister proved a sharp critic. She called the book "a study of character" which lacked plot and suffered from "too much . . . minuteness."[8] She disliked the hero particularly and the other characters in general because "they do nothing but talk." Finally, she commented that "the book as a whole" was "like a marvellous mosaic, whose countless minute pieces are fitted with so much skill and ingenuity that a real picture is presented," but also insisted that "such work has the disagreeable property of making criticism seem like picking to pieces." Its method, she said, was "mistaken."

5 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, May 23, 1875.
6 Sarah B. Wister to Wister, Oct. 2, 1875.
7 Henry James, "Frances Anne Kemble," *Temple Bar*, XCVII (April, 1893), 503–525.
8 *The North American Review*, CXXII (April, 1876), 420–425.

Nonetheless, she followed *The American* when it ran in *The Atlantic Monthly* beginning with the June issue, and later asked Owen what he thought of it. Despite the fact that Howells and others tried to convince James that he should let Christopher Newman win Claire de Cintre, Wister agreed with his grandmother that a tragic ending would be preferable. With two installments of the story yet to appear, he wrote to his mother in March, answering her question:

I think [*The American*] grows ten times more interesting than it grew before. At first I was afraid that Valentin's disclosure would turn out very weak indeed, but now I don't, and I can't really imagine at all how things will end. Perhaps the whole thing about the old Marquis is not "*artistic*," but I like it all the same. Suppose there should be an orthodox denouement & Urbaine & his mother should be sent to prison and the two should live happily ever afterward? That would be perfectly horrid, & I hope Mr. James will make it a terrific tragedy.[9]

The letter showed that notwithstanding the ridiculous plot outline he sent his mother three years before, Owen was an acute reader with much good sense about literature. He was not one of those James referred to when he wrote Howells that making the ending "prettier" would be "throwing a rather vulgar sop to readers who don't really know the world and don't measure the merit of a novel by its correspondence to the same."[10] Later, as we shall see, a similar debate occurred concerning the end of Wister's *Virginian*, where Wister used the "pretty" conclusion he was glad to see James avoid in 1877 and which James counseled him against in 1902. Yet the ending of *The Virginian* should not have surprised James, since he was himself the first to articulate it. Explaining to Howells why *The American* could not end happily, he pointed out that "Claire de Cintre would have hated New York, and Newman could not dwell in France. Leaving out Asia and Africa, there would be 'nothing left but a farm out West.' "[11]

One of the things which made James' comment to Howells interesting was that when James made it he knew little or nothing about the "farm out West" except that Howells came from there. Signifi-

9 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Mar. 13, 1877.
10 James quoted in Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Conquest of London*, 254.
11 *Ibid.*, 253.

cantly, he recognized the West as the only possible location for a "pretty" conclusion to Christopher Newman's love affair: The new *man* could escape from history only by going to the new *land.* When the problem came up again fourteen years afterward, it was, of course, the same problem, but it also appeared in a different light, because Wister, who raised it, brought a first-hand experience of history to his literary subject. While Wister unconsciously prepared to receive such experience, James, living mostly in London, neared his first period of great productivity. And just as Wister had no way of knowing that the conclusion James *didn't* use in *The American* was the one *The Virginian would* use, James had no way of knowing that his own most important contact with the American West was not William Dean Howells, but Fanny Kemble, of whom he had at last become a friend as well as admirer. In 1877, James joined Miss Kemble for a few days at Stratford-on-Avon. When her autobiographical *Record of a Girlhood* was published in 1878, he paid tribute with a laudatory, unsigned essay in *The Nation.* During a trip to Italy, he wrote her faithfully and in great detail. Not until Wister went to Wyoming in 1885, did the cloudy connections which linked Miss Kemble with the "farm out West" begin to emerge, but other connections, which linked James with Miss Kemble's grandson, rapidly became impossible to miss.

Wister was twenty-one years old and in his third year at Harvard when *The Portrait of a Lady*, James' most important work to date, appeared. Initially, Wister found that college life failed to meet his expectations, but soon discovered that Boston, as he put it, "has more remarkable people in it than I thought." Among them was Mr. George Abbot James—Henry's friend, but no relation—who recommended *The Portrait of a Lady* to Owen about a month after it was published. The book, he said, had "more fertility of plot than any novel . . . for 25 years."[12] Wister had meant to read the *Portrait*, but was kept from it by a heavy reading schedule which included *Middlemarch*, Bryce's *Holy Roman Empire*, Elizabeth Latimer's new novel called *My Wife and My Wife's Sister*, Rosetti's poems, and a book by Sismondi. In addition, he heard a great deal of music. During the single month of November, the list included "Sympho-

12 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Dec. 6, 1881.

nies 2, 3, 4, & 7 of Beethoven, overtures to Don Giovanni, & Die Zauberflote . . . The Meistersinger & Flying Dutchman, the ballet music from Gluck's Iphigenie in Aulide, a symphony by Emanuel Bach, & one by Mozart, The Cantata on Romeo & Juliette by Berlioz, and a lot more, more or less interesting compositions."[13] At the time, he planned to be a composer himself, and it was appropriate that when James, who returned to the United States in November, 1881, finally met Wister face to face, they attended the opera together.

The next year, Wister graduated summa cum laude and made a trip during the summer to England and the Continent. He called on Henry James in London, played poker with some British actors and was dismayed by "the looks of English female flesh," calling English girls "rabid manhunters" and commenting that "as an American I am not eligible and therefore no attention is paid to me."[14] Two months afterward in France, he, his mother and Miss Kemble again encountered James, who was beginning his "little tour," at Tours, where they all spent a week together. James found Mrs. Wister tired and surprisingly older. Miss Kemble still kept his enthusiastic admiration. Owen, he thought, was "attractive and amiable," but also "light and slight, both in character and in talent."[15] The "intwisted . . . imagination" was not yet discovered. Wister began to find it two years later when he met William Dean Howells at the Tavern Club in Boston and started to write rather than only plan a novel. James unerringly sensed that Wister was finding something when he read "How Lin McLean Went East," the younger man's first extended western story, in the December, 1892, number of *Harper's Magazine*.

II

Before graduating from Harvard, Wister had written a series of burlesque sketches called "The New Swiss Family Robinson" for the *Lampoon*, which S. W. Sever and Company of Cambridge brought out as a book the same year, 1882. The May issue of *Atlantic* printed his poem on Beethoven. Both works were indeed

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Entry for Sunday, July 16, in Wister's 1882 Journal.

[15] James quoted by Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Middle Years* (New York, 1962), 53.

"light and slight" as well as "attractive and amiable," but in another area Wister's "talent" seemed more promising. By 1883, when James judged Wister and dismissed him, Franz Liszt, who talked with Wister for an hour and listened while he played the piano, had told Miss Kemble that the young man had "*un talent prononcè*" for music. Partly on the basis of Liszt's judgment, Wister intended to study music at the *Conservatoire* in Paris, but by December, 1883, he was back in Boston, at his father's request, working as a clerk at the Union Safe Deposit Vaults on State Street. If the job did nothing else, it showed Wister that his talent was not for banking. The routine depressed him, and he wrote his mother that "there are three things which I do. One is to be a receiving teller . . . . The second . . . is to run upstairs to the Union Bank . . . the third . . . which is the most tiresome is to calculate interest." His life was "not difficult, but exceedingly monotonous."[16]

Yet much as Wister disliked his duties, they left him time to see a good deal of opera and mingle with the Boston literati. It was in this latter role that he became a founding member of the Tavern Club in 1884 and helped elect "gently smiling Howells"[17] its first president. Composed of "undomesticated young men" who "jested and romped," drank Chianti and "abounded in whims," the club made a welcome relief from the routine of business. For Wister, its most important product was a novel, which he wrote in collaboration with Langdon Mitchell, a distant cousin and former classmate. They showed the piece to Howells, who told them that it was "altogether too plain spoken" for American readers. "A whole fig tree," the editor said, "couldn't cover one of the women characters in it."[18] Many years afterward, Wister addressed the issue of this delicate sensibility, writing that the editor "did pitch his pipe too low."[19] Wister admitted that "possibilities undoubtedly lurk in chronicling small beer" but felt that "Burgundy and champagne" were often more exciting. How far his own taste ran as a young man toward

16 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Dec. 21, 1883.

17 Owen Wister, "William Dean Howells," *The Atlantic Monthly*, CLX (December, 1937), 707.

18 Fanny Kemble Wister, ed., *Owen Wister Out West: His Journals and Letters* (Chicago, 1958), 11.

19 Owen Wister, "William Dean Howells," 708.

the stronger drink was illustrated by the delightfully bawdy journal he kept of a hiking trip through New England during his college years. It related flirtations with country girls, city girls, shop girls, waitresses, and practically everybody else. Nowhere did a serious note intrude into the account but it was still full of "women characters" like those to which Howells objected. One coquettish waitress at a bad hotel in Hoosic Valley inspired Wister to a satiric fantasy which included "two trembling bodies," one "tender and delicate with firm, cool flesh over which . . . rosy flushes of excitement are chasing each other along the rounded curves of the bosom and the thigh," and the other, "supple and straight with muscular well-shaped legs and arms."[20] Few but Howells would call such writing "plain spoken," but its anatomical quality was impossible to miss.

The high-spirited novel notwithstanding, Wister was past his first youth in 1884. Four events made this unmistakably plain to him. First, Theodore Roosevelt, Wister's close friend and classmate, experienced the double misfortune of his wife's death and the failure of his own health. He withdrew from politics and went to live on a ranch at Medora, North Dakota. Second, since Wister made it known that he was dissatisfied with his job at Union Safe Deposit Vaults, and the promotion promised him seemed slow in coming, Dr. Henry Coit, his old headmaster at St. Paul's School, offered him a teaching position. The good faith of Dr. Coit's offer was beyond question, but for Wister, with Liszt's praise still in his memory and surrounded by boyhood friends who had made names for themselves, it comprised an uncomfortable reminder that he was twenty-four years old and without a vocation. Third, another of Wister's Harvard classmates, George Waring, broke all relations with his family and went west with his wife and four children to live on a ranch in Washington Territory. This, said Wister, was a "real shock"[21] and made him feel most unpleasant. Finally, Wister's own health, which had been delicate from time to time even when he was a boy, began to deteriorate. Early in April, his face became swollen. A specialist assured him that he would be well within a month, but August came and recovery was still not in sight. By the end of September, he

[20] Undated college notebook.

[21] Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Apr. 5, 1884.

was depressed with life in general and Boston in particular, writing to his mother that "the Boston you remember as clever and pleasant is gone" and characterizing its society as "school-girlish . . . gauche, shy and wooden."[22] He stayed home much of the time and read history. Even his old love, the opera, failed to please him. In January, 1885, he wrote that the performances were like "being requested to read exclusively Waverly . . . Sandford and Merton once every year and paying five dollars for it." Bitterly, he stated his hope that "they all lost money."[23] It was the last letter he wrote on Union Safe Deposit Vaults' stationery.

In July, he was at Point of Rocks, a stage station in Wyoming Territory, where the air was "better than all other air," and the scenery reminded him of Spain, the Campagna, and the Cork Valley by turns.[24] For the next three months, he lived with Major Frank Wolcott on a ranch in the Big Horn Basin. Hunting, camping, and sightseeing, he still managed to read *Silas Lapham* and *A Modern Instance*, both of which he praised. He also poured over *New Arabian Nights* and *More Arabian Nights* by Robert Louis Stevenson, noting of their author that "the man is excessively clever and whimsical and has real talent."[25] Wister loved reading the adventurous tales aloud, and told his mother that for such a purpose they were "worth all your 'Lady Barbarinas' and 'Georgiana's Reasons' jammed together and fricasseed." Howells' essentially wholesome Americans and Stevenson's swashbuckling Englishmen seemed more in tune with Wyoming than James' cosmopolites. When Wister began to write about the West, he showed how attractive he found the former two types by fusing them into the figure of the "cowpuncher" which he insisted was both distinctively American and characteristically Saxon. But although Wister wasn't ready to admit it in 1885, the Jamesian cosmopolite was as important to him as either of those others. Whether he liked it or not, he *was* the Jamesian type.

Therefore, he was back at Cambridge by the middle of October, going to law school, his health recovered, thinking seriously about

22 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Sept. 19, 1884.
23 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 12, 1885.
24 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, July 6, 1885.
25 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, July 17, 1885.

becoming a writer. For the first time he read not only critically but with an eye to what it could teach him about the craft. Dickens, he supposed, had "style" but he himself didn't know what style was:

> The only thing I know about it is that it's something I haven't got . . . and I don't see how to arrive at style . . . I don't see that Howells has any style. And Henry James' I wouldn't write if I could . . . Altogether I am at sea as to style and believe two things about it. One, that it should be Anglo-Saxon and two, that it should be modern.[26]

Nonetheless, he was writing something—designated only as "the manuscript," which he could not decide whether to submit for publication.

At forty-three, James had published four major novels, and was at work on some of his finest short fiction. While James lived at Bellosguardo, enjoying an Italian holiday and beginning to think about *The Aspern Papers*, Wister did well at Harvard Law School and tried with some determination to get published. In 1886, he wrote an essay called "Some Remarks on the Greek Play," which he unsuccessfully submitted to both the *Atlantic* and the *Harvard Monthly*. The *Atlantic* for April, 1887, printed his unsigned essay on "Republican Opera" in its "Contributor's Club," and Wister, although he called the piece "a literary catastrophe," said he was "proud to be able to get it into such a magazine."[27] During the summer, Wister made his second trip west. James, back in London by the end of July, wrote his essay on Robert Louis Stevenson, whom he had met three years before at Bournemouth.[28] James sent a proof copy of the article to Stevenson at Saranac Lake, New York, where the latter had recently moved for his health, in October. Shortly afterward, Wister asked James for a letter of introduction to Stevenson.

The requested introduction arrived early in December, informing Stevenson that Wister was a "brilliant and accomplished young man."[29] In a separate letter, James asked Wister to notice how Stevenson seemed "in health," for he was concerned about him.

26 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Nov. 16, 1885.
27 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, undated, 1887.
28 "Robert Louis Stevenson," *Century Magazine*, XXXV (April, 1888), 868–879.
29 *The Stevenson Library of E. J. Beinecke* (New Haven, 1958), IV, 1435.

Commenting on Wister's account of Wyoming, he exclaimed: "What you say of the far West interests me much. If I could only see it! But I never shall. I don't know how."[30] Stevenson promptly wrote to Wister that "anyone who comes in the name of our dear Henry James is welcome at my door."[31] Wister, however, never made the trip to Saranac Lake, because, as he wrote his mother, he was "too poor." In January, 1888, he had only $130.00 in his bank account, which he was trying to make last until May.[32] February, 1888, saw publication of "The Lantern Bearers," Stevenson's romantic-critical essay in *Scribner's*, and Wister commented of the piece that it was "a beautiful and true thing and quite the best word on its subject that I know."[33] James' article on Stevenson was finally published by the *Century Magazine* in April. When Stevenson died late in 1894, both James and Wister paid tribute. Wister's memorial poem appeared in the April number of *Atlantic*, James' memorial essay five years later in the *North American Review*.

Their mutual admiration for Stevenson failed to bring James and Wister closer together for two reasons: first, because Wister was only beginning to develop enough skill as a writer for James to admire when Stevenson died; second, because Wister, as we have seen, was not always enthusiastic about James' writing, and tended to think of Stevenson more as a relief from James than as a link with him. The strongest tie between James and Wister remained what it had been since Christmas, 1873—the women of Wister's family. That tie, however, seemed to be weakening. In July, 1887, James, on his way back to London from Bellosguardo, encountered Miss Kemble at Stresa. Even she had aged, and even James noticed it, calling her "an extinct volcano."[34] By the next year she was worse, and Mrs. Wister, who spent the summer in Europe with her, became increasingly concerned. On her way back to America in September, Mrs. Wister called on James at his London flat and especially asked him to keep her posted on Miss Kemble's health. In March, 1890, when her health and certain other factors made it necessary for

30 Henry James to Wister, Dec. 18, 1887.
31 Undated letter of 1888 from Robert Louis Stevenson to Wister.
32 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 24, 1888.
33 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Feb. 28, 1888.
34 James quoted by Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Middle Years*, 232.

Miss Kemble to move away from London to Bournemouth, James wrote to Mrs. Wister in Philadelphia to assure her that Miss Kemble "likes the place [*Bournemouth*] . . . and there is now a certain humbuggery of spring in the air which will help it to tide her over the interval before a new settlement in town."[35] He told Mrs. Wister that he planned to leave for Italy in April, but, even so, he thought often of Miss Kemble. He wrote the great lady from Bavaria in June, describing the beauty of the alps he knew she loved. A month later, when Miss Kemble moved to Kent, James wrote from Toscana, praising the Italian countryside, expressing interest in Miss Kemble's "domestic arrangements," and telling her how glad he was that she had "gotten into the pleasant Kentish country."[36] At the same time, James was working on his dramatic version of *The American*, and whether or not the two events had any causal connection, it was appropriate that his kindness to "the terrific Kemble" during her decline coincided with the beginning of his own efforts as a dramatist.

Wister was also trying *his* hand at the drama. In 1889, the year after his nonmeeting with Stevenson, Wister moved into the Philadelphia offices of Francis Rawle and began to practice law while his mother and grandmother were in Europe, but somewhat to his surprise he found himself "grinding all my spare hours tooth and nail in the domain of art."[37] His main project was an opera about Montezuma. By the beginning of August, however, his health was bothering him again. "Cutting out pleasure entirely," he wrote, made the difference "between how I felt a year ago today and how I feel now—and it's wide."[38] He was troubled by a numbness in his wrists which made it difficult for him to play the piano or write, and, early in October, he was on his way back to Wyoming where "you get the first chapter of Genesis."[39] He did not intend to return "until my conscience bids me, and, that," he added, "will not be particularly soon."[40]

35 Typed copy of a letter from Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, Mar. 9, 1890, Bryn Mawr College Library.

36 Henry James to Frances Anne Kemble, July 24, 1890.

37 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, May 28, 1890.

38 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Aug. 10, 1889.

39 Postcard from Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Oct. 11, 1889.

40 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Oct. 14, 1889.

Much as he loved the West, however, it never occurred to Wister that he might go there to start a ranch, or even that towns like Cheyenne and Denver offered opportunities for young men like himself in law and politics. He continued to regard the region much as Henry James' Americans regarded Europe, as a "watering place." Ceaselessly aware of his identity as a Philadelphian, Wister assured his father that "my plan is not to become a pioneer or a settler." Instead, he planned "to return and complete the index of the law book on which Bob Ralston and I are at work, and continue to walk down Walnut Street in the A.M. and up Walnut Street in the P.M." Whereas the routine of a State Street clerk was not attractive, that of a Philadelphia lawyer obviously *was*. Even at the spectacular Wind River, Wister still felt the tug of Philadelphia gentility. Yet the western trip of 1889 was different from those which preceded it because Wister's personal orientation had shifted. For the first time, he was taking copious notes on his western travels with the end in view of writing stories from them. "One feels much better," he said, "writing against a big background of certainty."[41] By Thanksgiving, he was back at the office on Walnut Street, completing the law index, but the place seemed somehow different. Wister's outdoor suntan merely *reflected* the change. Its *substance* was contained in the hundreds of pages of "material" Wister had collected about the West. *Lippincott's Magazine* printed another of his poems, and Wister continued to work on his opera about Montezuma. He had finished a burlesque romance he called "The Dragon of Wantley," but was having trouble finding a publisher for it. Despite his later recollections, however, he was also working on a story about the West in 1890, even though his publications—like another poem which appeared in *Lippincott's* in the spring of 1891—continued to be concerned with other matters. Wister returned to Wyoming during the summer of 1890, and again the next year, when Yellowstone Park reminded him of "the most beautiful passages in Wagner's Trilogy." The fact that music and words continued to be curiously mingled in Wister's imagination was interesting enough in itself, but it also indicated how rapidly and in what direction that imagination was developing. First, the understanding of landscape as music

41 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Nov. 5, 1889.

showed that Wister was already habitually thinking about history and experience in terms of art, as James had counseled in "The Art of Fiction." Second, by thinking specifically of Wagner when he saw the Yellowstone, Wister demonstrated his affinity for the romantic and spectacular, whatever form it took. The subtle change begun in 1889 was transforming Wister from tourist into professional observer. Another dimension was added to the change in January, when H. M. Alden of *Harper's* accepted Wister's first two western stories for publication—"Hank's Woman" for the weekly, and "How Lin McLean Went East" for the magazine. The former story, said Wister, "makes its effect by means of loud orchestration, cymbals, kettledrum, etc." The latter was "andante sostenuto . . . without a single brass instrument."[42] When they were printed in August and December respectively, Wister's career as a western writer was begun. And the fact that Alden paid him $175.00 for the two pieces made it look as though the career might be practical as well as exciting.

Meanwhile, James Russell Lowell, whom Wister had called "dry, small and unilluminated" in 1886,[43] died at Boston, and Henry James wrote an essay praising him, which *The Atlantic* printed in January, 1892. Shortly thereafter, James' own sister died, bringing a swift and sympathetic letter from Mrs. Wister. Toward the end of March, James replied with thanks and the admission that "my sister's death makes a great sad difference in my life—& gives me a sort of acute sense of loneliness in England."[44] He also commented on an earlier letter from Mrs. Wister which praised his Lowell essay, a subject about which he felt sensitive. Lowell's "English friends," James lamented, were "without exception . . . silent" concerning the tribute. The whole situation reminded him of a similar one two years before, when, "after the death of Turgenieff," he wrote of the Russian novelist with "every tenderness," only to discover that "the Nicholas Turgenieffs didn't like it at all." Altogether, James was gloomy. Miss Kemble, he reported, seemed "infinitely changed." Replying to the praise Mrs. Wister offered for his dramatization of

42 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Nov. 14, 1892.

43 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Dec. 4, 1886.

44 Typed copy of a letter from Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, Mar. 24, 1892, Bryn Mawr College Library.

The American, he admitted that the work had "a good deal of rightness," but insisted that "its wrongness was greater." He closed by saying that he wanted to get away from London soon, but wasn't sure where to go.

James went to Italy. Wister, not surprisingly, went west, this time to Washington. Yet it *was* surprising that Wister chose as his destination the ranch of George Waring, the old friend who gave his Philadelphia propriety "a real shock" in 1884. The visit to Waring was one of many indications of the new tack Wister's life was taking. Another and even more dramatic indication of the same thing occurred when J. B. Lippincott finally printed *The Dragon of Wantley*. Not only did the unfavorable reviews which the book received fail to puncture Wister's ego, but the long awaited publication itself failed to generate any enthusiasm in him. A new period of Wister's life had begun, leaving behind *The Dragon* and all it represented. It was as though the burlesque had never been written at all. The mediaeval European setting, allusions to Wister's Harvard classmates, conventional love affairs and rowdy drinking songs were parts of a past in which Wister simply found himself no longer interested. As the continent slipped past his Pullman window while he traveled toward George Waring's ranch, however, Wister discovered something he *was* interested in—the young woman sitting across the aisle from him, a New Yorker on her way to visit a sister in Montana. She was "nice looking, very frank and American." Wister noted in his journal that "she is a good specimen of the serene, competent, unprotected American virgin, who journeys successfully about the world and dismays Henry James."[45] The literary observation had a literary result: Wister made the flesh and blood "American virgin" into Jessamine Buckner, heroine of his first novel, *Lin McLean*.

The virgin's most attractive quality was virginity itself. As Jessamine Buckner, she had a purity so powerful that it could reform a whole community of rowdy cowboys. As "Willomene" from "Hank's Woman" she practiced a stubborn Christianity which led her finally to murder and suicide. As *Lady Baltimore*'s Eliza LaHue she played a waiting game to capture the man who rightfully belonged to her.

45 Entry for July 8 in Wister's western notebook for 1892, Western History Institute at the University of Wyoming.

In short, she was a new woman for the New World, the proper female inhabitant of a *virgin* continent. Wister didn't yet know it in 1892, as he sat across the aisle from the young New Yorker, but, if for no other reason than to meet and deal somehow with the embodied purity of the virgin in the virgin West, there would have to be a Virginian.

The trouble, as Henry James recognized, was that innocence often meant emptiness, and a key element in the relationship between James and Wister—which began to be a truly *literary* relationship at the moment when Wister met his "American virgin" on the train—was precisely the hiatus, the vacuum. Ironically, Wister had to learn from James how to see that the American vacuum contained something, and celibate, expatriate James later had to turn to Wister—who had become husband, father, politician and historian—to find out what Wister discovered. Yet the relationship could not develop until another sort of vacuum opened between James and Wister. While Wister visited George Waring, news arrived from England that Miss Kemble was rapidly sinking. Wister wrote to his mother that "I hope my grandmother's days may be few now—that is all anyone can hope."[46] Two months later, the hope was accomplished, and Henry James wrote to Mrs. Wister of "the great beneficence & good fortune of your mother's instantaneous & painless extinction." At the funeral, he felt "a strange bareness and a kind of evening chill as it were in the air, as if some great object that had filled it for long had left an emptiness—from displacement—to all the senses."[47]

Despite the burial service, which James felt "a hideous old imposition of the church," he was glad for Miss Kemble's peaceful death, which suggested "the end of some reign or the fall of some empire" that was ready to be over. At George Bentley's request James wrote a loving tribute which *Temple Bar* printed three months later. Mrs. Wister read the article in Philadelphia, and paused in her writing of unsigned "southern vignettes" for *The Atlantic* long enough to thank James for his affectionate recollections. James replied from Lucerne that he was relieved, "so nervous & worried have I been

[46] Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Nov. 14, 1892.

[47] Typed copy of a letter from Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 20, 1893, Bryn Mawr College Library.

ever since I sent you . . . my terribly *conditioned* attempt to brush in a portrait of your mother."[48] Again, he mentioned his Lowell essay which he felt was "almost *resented* in some quarters," and again he mentioned his unwanted portrait of Turgenieff. He told Mrs. Wister that he wrote the essay largely because he was "deeply struck with the stupid ignorance of the nature & degree of your mother's eminence exhibited in the London papers." Therefore, he concentrated on "her public, her professional, theatrical and literary side" at the expense of "details about her *personal* charm." He ended by thanking Mrs. Wister for her southern essays "as sweet as the scent of magnolia." The fact that he failed to mention Owen or his newly found success in writing conveniently exemplified an important feature of his perception; from Christmas, 1873 to May, 1893, James never really *noticed* Owen. Anyone who stood so close beside "the terrific Kemble" was bound to seem insignificant. James called the great lady "la dame qui va chantant par les montagnes," recalling that "her endowment was so rich, her spirit so proud, her temper so high, that, as she was an immense success, they made her indifference and her eccentricity magnificent." He summed it all up with the statement that "destiny had turned her out a Kemble."[49]

Owen Wister was *not* a Kemble. When James first knew him, he was a bright but somewhat conventional young Philadelphian with none of the gorgeous eccentricity that made the grandmother so exciting. But he *was* Owen Wister, and with the space his magnificent, volcanic grandmother once filled in Henry James' imagination now become "an emptiness," there was some chance that James would look beside the chasm and truly see for the first time the smallish but curiously promising figure standing there. Although he was addressing another problem, Wister touched the issue quite deftly in a musical essay published by *The Atlantic* nine months after his grandmother's death. "If I believe that the Gotterdammerung is the sublimest height tragic opera has attained," he argued, "I can still be happy on another night with Fra Diavolo or La Sonnambula." A really intelligent man, in other words, has tastes which are catholic: "Heavy or light, symphony or opera, Italian, French, German, or English, he stands ready to enjoy anything that comes,

[48] Typed copy of a letter from Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, May 9, 1893, *ibid.*

[49] Henry James, "Frances Anne Kemble," *Temple Bar*, XCVII (April, 1893), 503–525.

if it be good of its kind."[50] Twenty years had passed since Henry James met Sarah Wister at Rome, and Wister himself, thirty-three years old, now stood on a threshold of discovery analagous to that which James previously occupied. When *The Atlantic* printed his essay on musical "catholicity" in November, 1893, Wister had spent the better part of a year wandering in the American West, where he experienced a catholicity he never dreamed of.

James remembered the summer of 1893 as long and dusty with a "rainless radiance & heat as hasn't been known for a century."[51] It recalled to him "the spacious holidays of one's childhood"—but not without a certain pang, for he was fifty years old and suffering from gout. He worked steadily on *Guy Domville* and saw his brother William, on sabbatical from Harvard, at Lucerne. Miss Kemble's absence made him cherish her image as a memory, but the features of that image gradually became less distinct. Speaking of Miss Kemble in a November letter to Sarah Wister, James commented that "the aspect of a human being's life simplifies itself strangely when they are gone." Miss Kemble's aspect had become for James that of "some big natural accident or disordered landscape—an inundation or a snowstorm, something that could only be as it was." She was "such an *interesting* catastrophe" that James felt "*poorer* without her—disfurnished and reduced."[52] But he passed from this to a happier subject, the great Chicago fair, which Owen described as "a vision of grandeur, beauty and promise,"[53] and about which Sarah had written him. If Miss Kemble's death had been like "the fall of some great empire," this, as Henry Adams recognized, surely signified the rise of a new one. Yet James insisted on not saying so. He told Mrs. Wister that her description of the fair had "a beautiful glamor of white colonnades & blue water—like one's boyish vision of ancient Greece." The demonstration of the *new* empire so rapidly rising was tied for him to childhood imaginings of an *old* empire long ago fallen, and while the link thus forged was not altogether flattering

[50] Owen Wister, "Catholicity in Musical Taste," *The Atlantic Monthly*, LXXII (November, 1893), 650–655.

[51] Typed copy of a letter from Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, Nov. 11, 1893, Bryn Mawr College Library.

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] Notebook entry for July 6, 1893.

for Americans like Wister who saw the fair as a thrust into the future, it beautifully expressed James' perception of how fantastic the future was bound to be. Significantly, he closed by acknowledging to Mrs. Wister the new empire's most fantastic feature, which was also, of course, its blankest and most "virginal": "I envy your boy the Great Divide—it sounds like a great dividend."

III

He was correct. The same month James wrote his letter to Mrs. Wister, *Harper's* printed "Em'ly," the first episode of *The Virginian* to be published. Earlier in the year, Wister had signed a contract with *Harper's* to write "eight or nine stories" illustrated by Frederic Remington for which he would be paid thirty-five dollars per thousand words. When the stories were published in book form he was to get a ten per cent royalty on sales. The arrangement pleased him, because it freed him for work he enjoyed, assured him of getting paid for it, and gave him the chance to be recognized as a writer. It also changed his attitude toward other writers. He became more defensive toward chroniclers of the West such as Bret Harte, but gained a new respect for men like Kipling and James. After reading James' whimsical short story, "The Death of the Lion" in the April, 1894, *Yellow Book*, he wrote to his mother exclaiming "how nice Henry James is! I wish I could see him and talk *shop* with him."[54] This was a far cry from his earlier standoffishness. It signified a brightening of both his perceptions and his fortunes.

The next year, after his twelfth western journey, Wister reflected that a decade had passed since he first saw the Big Horn Basin:

> I went west that July day to cure a headache I had waked and slept with since February; I was very near despair—I hope what my cup still holds for me may not be in any part of that bitterness I knew between 1883 and 1885. . . . I am a wholesomer creature today—but—deliver us from evil! . . . No longer for headaches but material and to see men whom I regard [do I journey] in that country.[55]

Fourteen of his western stories had been printed by *Harper's Magazine* as well as numerous essays and poems in *Harper's* and

54 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, May 28, 1894.

55 Entry for September 27 in "Journal and Notes, 1895."

elsewhere. Eight of the western tales were about to be collected under the title of *Red ..sen and White* and published as a book. Henry Harper wanted Wister to take charge of the magazine's musical department and write a column on Philadelphia life for the weekly. Although he later refused both offers, Wister refrained from deciding at once, and instead took a holiday to visit friends in New England. Happy to be sought after, he also felt harried by too many pressures. In addition, he worried about his ageing parents. As he sat in the train between Philadelphia and Beverly Farms, he wrote in his diary that "I came away from the two at home this morning with compunction even for this short and most harmless absence." Sensing that both of them "grow to hate my going anywhere more and more," he nonetheless insisted that "I could not stay there with that thought in my mind when they are both perfectly well and within their ordinary lives."[56]

But the parents did not remain "perfectly well" for long. Wister's father died in March of the next year, 1896. James, who was busy looking for a "small . . . cheap" house[57] not too far from London to write *The Spoils o' Poynton* in, did not hear about the death until the first week in April, when he wrote to Mrs. Wister with his sympathy. Dr. Wister, he remembered, was "such a *man* or such a gentleman." As he summed Miss Kemble up by saying that "destiny had turned her out a Kemble," he similarly fixed her son-in-law by noting that "he was an admirable American"[58]—words which carried a special force when they came from the creator of Christopher Newman. Sarah had sent James a copy of *Red Men and White* some time before, and James took this opportunity to thank her for it. He was excited by the book, saying that "it has in its vivid erudition great merit of form and . . . a wealth of adventurous observation and experience that I can only wistfully envy." This was high praise indeed, which James felt he should be writing to Owen himself. Although he never quite said so, James was probably waiting for an invitation from Owen before he wrote about the book. Referring to the younger man directly, he shrugged off the whole affair: "I ought to be writing these things to *him* but he won't care.

56 *Ibid.*

57 James, quoted in Edel, *Henry James: The Treacherous Years* (New York, 1962), 157.

58 Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, Apr. 7, 1896.

Les jeunes don't. Happy, happy les jeunes!" James was mistaken about two things: first, Wister, at thirty-six, was no longer one of "les jeunes"; second, he cared very much for James' advice.

Two days after James posted his letter to Mrs. Wister in London, Owen was aboard a steamer bound for Cherbourg. On the seventh day out, he was mightily amused by something he witnessed. Actors in the little drama included "a Dane rather nice, a German count rather heavy . . . both entirely foolish speaking with small English," and, of course, the inevitable "nice American girl" for whom the "two foreigners" vied: "The count made . . . awful molasses compliments in German and then when she would say: 'but I don't understand, you know,' he would turn with heavy sweetness to the Dane and murmur 'dranslade her for me'." Concluding, Wister told his mother that "it was a piece of Henry James."[59]

Wister saw James a month later at the cottage in Sussex which the latter had rented for the summer. Whether or not the two men talked of Wister's experience on shipboard, they did speak of *Red Men and White* with its sometimes striking scenic effects of American prairies and deserts. One thing which struck James, however, was that Wister failed to take full advantage of the exciting landscape where he set his stories. Nearly all the tales began in the manner of Bret Harte by introducing characters or action, while the grand "dividend" of the Great Divide went begging. James himself was coming to a new understanding of the scenic through his contact with the Sussex countryside, which he described to his brother William as "quaint and simple and salubrious." The "sweet, slumbrous corner of the land, wholly unfashionable and very picturesque,"[60] appeared one way or another in many of his later works.

Wister, back at Philadelphia early in June, set out again for the West on July 16. From a camp on Wind River, he wrote a letter to his mother which showed how hard, suddenly, he was trying to come to terms with the *visual* qualities of setting. Whereas Yellowstone had before reminded him of Wagner, he now told his mother of an "extraordinary country that no one has described or (I think) can." He saw "red mounds that are turned to rich rose by the green of the cottonwood trees which green is by the rose reciprocally

[59] Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Apr. 15, 1896.

[60] James, quoted in Edel, *Henry James: The Treacherous Years*, 158.

glistened to transparent emerald." It was as though he had finally stopped remembering stories and tunes and opened his eyes.

When you take the sage-brush, which of itself is between lavender and the olive leaf, and find it looks white, green, blue, purple & violet, according to the angle of slant and the value of background against which it happens to be thrown, you are moving among intricacies for which painting would have to devise some wholly new conventions and methods to be able to state at all.

Part of Wister's new awareness may have come from Frederic Remington, with whom he quickly became a good friend after meeting him two years before—but its main source was elsewhere. Wister left no doubt about where the flood of new-found color came from when, immediately following the vivid impression, he commented that "I am going to follow Henry James' advice, and put much more landscape into my narrative. As I said to him & to you, it's been self-denial & fear of obstructing the reader that has held me from it."[61] His next story, "Destiny at Drybone," was his most "picturesque" to date.

While James published *What Masie Knew* and wrote "The Turn of the Screw," acquiring, meanwhile, his beloved "Lamb House" at Rye, Wister spent nearly the whole of 1897 in Philadelphia, trying to put his family's complicated financial affairs in order, and revising stories to go into his next book, *Lin McLean*. Early in 1898, the book was printed by Harper and Brothers, only narrowly preceding the explosion that sank *The Maine* in Havana harbor. Frederic Remington, long eager for a war, was elated that one seemed near. He urged Wister that it represented an opportunity which would not come again in their lifetimes. He wanted Wister to go to Cuba with him and write about the conflict while he drew pictures of it. Yet Wister did not share Remington's enthusiasm. Besides that, he was getting married. The bride was Mary Channing Wister, a cousin, whose father was a Philadelphia lawyer, and who got her middle name from William Ellery Channing, one of her mother's ancestors. When Owen married her, she was an accomplished pianist, a light of Philadelphia society, and a member of the Philadelphia Board of Education.

61 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, July 31, 1896.

James, who heard on March 4 of the engagement, called it a "direct & intempered literary blow." He was jesting, of course, but not altogether. He reminded Sarah Wister that two years ago Owen had promised to return to England for a longer visit with him, and now, just when he thought the visit might be accomplished, he learned instead that Wister was leaving the "celibate state." He called the news a "matrimonial brickbat" dropped suddenly on his own "candid & now much exposed skull," but hastened to add that he knew Wister would be "deliciously happy & hideously successful."[62] The letter demonstrated how wittily James could play the injured bachelor—a part at which, by this time, he had much practice. Yet James also had some reason to be hurt—not so much by Wister's "matrimonial brickbat" as by his failure to fulfill an earlier promise to send a copy of *Lin McLean* when it appeared. James explained, without the bantering tone of his other remarks, that since Owen had not sent the book, he was having to order it from the publisher. Somewhat abruptly, he complimented Sarah on her prospective daughter-in-law's "excellent pedigree," and closed by describing the "sweet little old house at Rye" which he had recently acquired.

Despite Wister's failure to send it, James read *Lin McLean*, and was impressed. No doubt he felt responsible for part of its skill, for Wister put into the book much that James helped him discover in 1896. Therefore, James mentioned both *Lin* and the earlier *Red Men and White* in the "American Letter" which the London journal, *Literature*, published on April 26. *Lin*, wrote James, exhibited "a talent distinctly to come back to . . . in which the manners of the remoter West are worked into the general context, the American air at large by a hand of a singularly trained and modern lightness." Together with *Red Men and White*, the book gave him "a pretext for saying that . . . a novelist interested in the general outlook of his trade may find the sharpest appeal of all in the idea of the chances in reserve for the work of imagination in particular—the vision of the distinguishable poetry of things . . . in such prose as really does

62 Typed copy of a letter from Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, Mar. 4, 1898, Bryn Mawr College Library.

arrive at expression."[63] Lurking somewhere in the involved syntax was James' recognition that Wister was finally beginning to come to terms with the possibilities of his subject.

Molly and Owen Wister were married in April, 1898. Both of them wanted a honeymoon in the West, preferably in the Wind River valley of Wyoming, but because of the war they changed their plans, deciding instead on a visit to Charleston which they found "simply delicious." At the beginning of July, however, they were off for the Methow Valley in Washington State to see George Waring. There, they lived for three months in an isolated one-room cabin, from which Molly wrote to her new mother-in-law—whom she still addressed as "cousin Sarah"—that "I have never liked anything so much as this new experience." The solitude worked on her much as it had on Owen when he first went west thirteen years before, so that the hills, which she "really hated at first," soon appeared to her as "freedom & repose, & endless space." They had, she asserted, given her "new eyes."[64]

The Wisters were back at Philadelphia early in October. They bought a house on Pine Street, where Mary Channing, their first child, was born about a year later. Wister wrote steadily, working most of the time now on stories he later wove into *The Virginian*, but he also continued to write poetry, such as the long patriotic ode he delivered as Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard Commencement, and, as always, he kept up with his reading. Of Frank Norris' *McTeague* he commented that "it is one of the most brutal, repulsive and painful novels I have read." Yet nonetheless, "looking back on the whole" at the book, he felt it had "quite extraordinary and original power."[65] Glad to see that Harvard was still producing "really new American talent," he also noted that Norris had the advantage of "the personal guidance of Mr. Howells." When *The Greater Inclination*, Edith Wharton's first collection of short stories, appeared in 1899, Wister wrote from Rhode Island, where he and his new family were summering, to comment that the book had "enjoyed the whole of Saunderstown—which is testimony to its

63 *American Letters* (London, 1898), 201–202.
64 Molly Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Aug. 11, 1898.
65 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, July 22, 1899.

being clever, but it is not so *damned* clever." Disgusted by what seemed to him the stories' derivative nature, he insisted that "the whole is not the child, but the stillborn echo of Henry James."[66]

During the winter, Wister finished his biography of U. S. Grant, which William James, Henry's brother, read a year later with astonished admiration. The "little tome," he said, was "really colossal" because it gave him "a new idea of the way in which it is possible to write history." Having hardly read Wister's fiction, James had no idea that "O. W. was so great a man."[67] Wister, however, although he now knew that Henry James was a great man, continued to pick and choose among the great man's works. When he read "Maud-Evelyn" in the April, 1900, number of *The Atlantic*, he commented that "it is virtuosity carried to the desication of desolation."[68] In *The Awkward Age* he tried, but could not see "greatness or anything approaching it." The novel seemed to him "a study in the syntax of suggestion and not a work of art."[69] Although he now admired James as a writer, Wister still resisted the Jamesian style.

Yet the idea of Henry James was as important for Wister as even the idea of the American West was. Whereas the West gave Wister something to write *about*, James gave him a model to write *from*. The two factors appeared in complementary balance when Wister, who spent August and September of 1900 wandering in the San Joaquin Valley, took his family to Charleston the following spring to practice the Jamesian technique of there coming to terms with what he had discovered. As James had produced dramatic versions of his works, so Wister worked on a dramatic version of *Lin McLean*. As James had collected stories into novels, so Wister bent his own energies to the task of "melting the episodes of 'The Virginian' into a continuous whole." The problem of his book's narrator caused him much concern, leading him to reread carefully *Madame Bovary*. He was relieved to discover that Flaubert confronted the same problem he himself was wrestling with, and that in *Madame Bovary* the first

66 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Aug. 2, 1899.

67 William James to Mrs. Whitman, a mutual friend of the James and Wister families, Feb. 5, 1901. Mrs. Whitman sent James' letter on to Wister.

68 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Mar. 30, 1900.

69 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Apr. 18, 1900.

person narrator "simply dissolved away into the third." Of his own efforts, he knew that "it is impossible to foretell the result until the experiment is completely tried and its effect ascertained by the presence or absence of critical comment."[70] Like James, he recognized the experimental and dramatic quality of any effectively stated literary work. In November, shortly after becoming the father of twins, he signed a contract with the Macmillan Company to publish *The Virginian*—still fully aware that the work would not in any sense be completed until it was not only published, but read and reacted to.

While James lived quietly at Rye, Wister wrote furiously through the winter. In February, he told his mother that the book was "like going up a mountain."[71] Whenever he thought he had reached "the last rise," he discovered yet another rise ahead. By March 5, however, he was working on "the last, long chapter." Late in May, the book was printed. By the end of June it was clear that Wister had written his first "best seller." Yet Sarah Wister, as sharp a critic now as she had been in 1876, disliked *The Virginian* for the same reasons she disliked *Roderick Hudson*. Among other things, its organization was "piecemeal," its ending inadequate. To justify the novel to his mother, Wister made use of the same arguments James used to justify *The American*.

Answering his mother's charge that the book was patched together, Wister said that it did "not pretend to the regulation construction." Instead, it claimed to be first, "the portrait of a man," and second, "the picture, the whole, large picture, of the era & manners in which he existed, for a background." Furthermore, Wister argued, his handling of the subject was complete: "I take side after side of the manners of life, omitting none, and when I'm through you have the whole, with the man standing out in the middle." He admitted that the book's last chapter was "superfluous" but also added that it was "very wise," again borrowing from music to show why: "After the harsh drama preceding, it was desirable to have some serene closing cadences."[72] Nonetheless, he wished *The Virginian* "20 times better than it is," and could feel it in his bones

70 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Dec. 8, 1901.
71 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Feb. 9, 1902.
72 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, July 5, 1902.

that his *next* effort would turn out "a very big book indeed." Wister's ego was riding high. He was besieged with offers to write books and series of books under contract, interviewed as a celebrity, and asked to speak on important occasions. In August, *Current Literature* carried a full page picture of him on its cover. With the manifest destiny of his friend Theodore Roosevelt flourishing at Washington and his own star finally rising over book stores and magazine stands, whatever fears he once had about his talent being "light and slight" were gone. *The Virginian*, the story of a virginal cowboy from the state named for a virgin queen winning the American virgin in the virgin land of the Great Divide swept Wister's literary innocence into the past for good.

James, too, had achieved a kind of plateau in his career. His quiet years at Rye were drawing to a close, and since he had not visited the United States for more than twenty years, he began to contemplate the possibility of coming. When Wister heard this on August 5, 1902, he somewhat ungratefully commented that James "had much better come back (if it's not too late) and be bored with our absence of decor and our presence of genuineness of heart."[73] In the same letter, he waxed euphoric about the success of *The Virginian*, exclaiming that "there is only one critic left I care for and his word I shall not hear—time!" Yet he was mistaken again. Two days after Wister wrote that James might profit from American "genuineness of heart," James wrote from England to show how genuine his own heart was by warmly praising *The Virginian*. Carl Bode has argued that this remarkable letter showed how "James' kindness got in the way of his criticism."[74] On the contrary, the letter expressed the continuing lucidity of James' critical insights. What it showed was that regardless of superficial considerations, James could recognize and articulately discuss the shape and achievement of any literary utterance.

After gently chiding Wister for failing to send a copy of the book ("you never send me nothing"), James spoke directly to the point Owen had tried to justify a month earlier to his mother:

What I like best . . . is exactly the fact of the *subject* itself, so clearly & finely felt by you, I think, & so firmly carried out as the exhibition, to the

73 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Aug. 5, 1902.

74 Carl Bode, "Henry James and Owen Wister," *American Literature*, XXVA (May, 1954), 250.

last intimacy, of the man's character. . . . You have made him *live* with a high, but lucid complexity, from head to foot & from beginning to end; you have not only intensely seen & conceived him, but you have reached with him an admirable objectivity. . . .[75]

"Bravo, bravo," James cheered, but he also had his "reserves," the main one of which had to do with the book's "happy" ending. James here argued just as he had in justifying the conclusion of his own second novel. Instead of the "mere *prosaic* justice, & rather grim at that" which Wister gave his hero with "achieved parentage, prosperity, maturity" and union with, "the little Vermont person," Molly, James wanted "all sorts of poetic justice" for the Virginian. "I," wrote James, "should have made him perish in his flower & in some splendid sombre way." He wanted Wister to write another book, "something equally American on this scale or with this seriousness—for it's a great pleasure to see you bring off so the large & the sustained." He envied Wister both his memories of the American West and "the right to a competent romantic feeling about them." That, of course, was the key, for "competent romantic feeling" was not only what caused Wister to end *The Virginian* as he did, but also what caused James to feel that the ending was faulty. Instead of pursuing the issue, however, James patted Wister "officiously &, both violently & tenderly, on the admirably assiduous back," and ended with a "benediction" which included "your wife, your mother, your children, [and] your every circumstance (including your next book)."

Two weeks later, after more than fifty thousand copies of his new novel had been printed, Wister admitted that it was "versatile" of James to "like" *The Virginian*, also commenting on James' desire to have the hero killed: "Well, my pen paused suspended over that solution and I saw all the reasons for so doing. It took a year before I was certain that killing would be merely a bow to the ritual of the higher banality. . . ." Despite the fact that he himself called *The Virginian* "a colonial romance,"[76] Wister could not accept the extent of "romantic feeling" which James thought should dictate its form. As he told his mother in July, the hero's "unromantic future should be indicated in a book of this kind," which, he felt,

[75] Letter from Henry James to Owen Wister, Aug. 7, 1902. I have here used my own transcription of the letter, because Bode's contains several inaccuracies.

[76] Preface to the first edition.

was not "a pure romance like Undine."[77] The difference between James' attitude toward the "serene . . . cadences" with which *The Virginian* closed and Wister's was still the same difference which caused Wister to see the Chicago fair as "a vision of grandeur, beauty and promise" in 1893, while James saw it as a "boyish vision of ancient Greece." But Wister could not have made the distinction between the "colonial romance" of *The Virginian* and the "pure romance" of *Undine* in 1893, because he had not yet discovered what the former was. By causing him to open his eyes, James helped him find out. Wister's next step should obviously be to investigate how the two varieties of romance were related, and for the man who taught William James "a new . . . way . . . to write history" the investigation could proceed in only one direction.

IV

The preface to *The Virginian* stated that the American cowboy was a romantic type because "whatever he did, he did with his might." Similarly, Wister's essay, "The Evolution of the Cow Puncher," regarded the cowboy as lineal descendant of "fighting Saxon ancestors" who were collectively "conqueror, invader, navigator, buccaneer, explorer, colonist, tiger shooter," by genetic edict.[78] The essay prominently displayed a full-page illustration by Frederic Remington in which a lean cowboy rode his pony across a shadowy background of armored knights, plumed gentry, and bearded mountain men. It was appropriately entitled "The Last Cavalier." Wister loved the picture because it fused the romantic figure of the cowboy with a powerful sense of historical progression. "The Last Cavalier" must have been in Wister's mind in 1898 when he advised Henry Sedgwick of the *Atlantic Monthly* about writing an article called "English as Against French Literature," because the article understood English—and American—writing as something in which the "romance" of trade, exploration, business and even money were uniquely expressed as a result of the genetic make-up of people who produced it.[79] The point was, of course, that

77 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, July 5, 1902.

78 *Harper's Magazine*, XCI (September, 1895), 604, 614.

79 Henry Sedgwick, "English as Against French Literature," *The Atlantic Monthly*, LXXI (March, 1898), 289–298.

although Remington's picture had to be *called* "The Last Cavalier" in order to generate the necessary "romantic feeling," it obviously depicted not the *last* but the *latest* avatar of a type which was anything but terminal.

Wister's "romantic feeling" differed from the "pure romance" of *Undine* by being fundamentally historical. Therefore, *The Virginian*'s hero had to be provided with an "unromantic future" in order to make him historically plausible. The process Wister defined in the book was essentially the same as that expressed in "The Last Cavalier" by the distinct and material horseman surrounded by ethereal, ideal shapes—a collision of "pure romance" with chronological actuality. It was also identical to the one perceived by Henry James when he visited Charleston, South Carolina, in 1905, noting on one hand that the southern landscape gave him "the sense of a figure prepared for romantic interment,"[80] and on the other that "Charleston suffered, for the observer, by the merciless law of thinness."[81] The whole puzzling matter came clear for James that night as he talked with a "distinguished and competent friend" who held up a "bright critical candle" for him to see by. The "friend" was Owen Wister.

At the moment when James and Wister looked out together toward Fort Sumter on that February night in 1905, both men unmistakably recognized the "intwisted . . . imagination" they shared, but even though their recognition of it may well have been sudden, the thing itself emerged concurrently with Wister's sudden establishment, when *The Virginian* appeared, as a public figure of great notoriety. The book's unconventional treatment of its unconventional subject caused Wister to be regarded as historian, biographer, novelist, and political theorist—all at once, and largely on the basis of a single work. By defining "the man" he made hero of *The Virginian*, Wister also radically redefined himself. Toward the end of July, J. O. H. Cosgrave of Doubleday Page & Company demonstrated how fast the redefinition occurred by urging Wister to write a series of short biographies of prominent American politicians. In the same letter, he mentioned he had given Frank Norris,

80 Henry James, *The American Scene* (London, 1907), 393.
81 *Ibid.*, 394.

who was "off to California for a rest" and planned an ocean voyage around Cape Horn "in a wheat ship," a copy of *The Virginian* to read while he traveled.[82] A month later, Cosgrave wrote again, saying that Jack London thought *The Virginian* "*the* book about the cowboy." London agreed with James, that Wister had "justified and explained . . . [the Virginian's] personality and really defined him."[83] Others compared Wister to George Eliot, Tennyson, Carlyle, and even Shakespeare. Henry Holt, the publisher, urged him to "get over thinking . . . that your popularity is a sign of poor work."[84]

After such high praise from James and others, it is doubtful if Wister was seriously troubled about being "popular." He did, on the other hand, welcome the benefits of that popularity. Money from royalties enabled him to remodel his summer house at Saunderstown and make a number of investments. He automatically became an authority on the West, writers, literature in general and "Americanism." In December, Richard Watson Gilder invited him to go to Central America for the *Century Magazine*. In January, he dined at the White House with Cabot Lodge, Finley Peter Dunne, and, of course, the President. When it became known that he was author of *The Virginian*, several ladies at the following diplomatic reception "screamed." Happily, Wister noted, "none fainted."[85] Yet the most gratifying result of *The Virginian*'s success was that it raised Wister's other works—even those not yet completed—into prominence. An unsigned essay in *The Atlantic* commented of Wister that "the same grasp and vision which have given his stories their unusual historic and human value made his short Life of General Grant a masterpiece," going on to note that Wister was rumored to be planning biographies of Franklin and Oliver Wendell Holmes, and concluding that "the completion of Mr. Wister's portrait gallery is worth waiting for."[86] For the first time, both readers and publishers were consistently and enthusiastically wondering what Wister would do next.

Wister's main project in 1903 was writing a dramatic version of his best seller. By April, he had finished four of its planned five acts. Enthusiastically, he noted that "it seems to me so effective a play

82 J. O. H. Cosgrave to Wister, July 23, 1902.
83 J. O. H. Cosgrave to Wister, Aug. 6, 1902.
84 Henry Holt to Wister, Sept. 17, 1902.
85 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 9, 1903.
86 "The Mind and the Book," *The Atlantic Monthly*, XCI (February, 1903), 283.

that I can't imagine it's not proving a thing managers would jump at." Yet he still suspected his "ignorance of the pure play-writing craft," and perhaps for this reason went to considerable lengths to justify what he did with the play in terms of conventions derived from classical Greek tragedy.[87] What this showed was merely that Wister did not yet fully understand *The Virginian* himself. When the drama was finally finished, it was neither tragic nor a product of "the pure playwriting craft." It was a musical comedy which at once fulfilled Wister's long-standing ambition to combine music with drama and adumbrated "The Last Cavalier" by recognizing that historical romance, since it dealt with a continuous process, had necessarily to be comic.

While Sarah Wister, impressed by Owen's favorable review of *The Pit* in *The Atlantic*, read Frank Norris' novel and found it nauseating, Wister spent spare hours reading *The Wings of The Dove*, which he described as "a marvelous and masterly production." To charges that the book was "a picture of the human heart too base, too unrelieved to be permitted," Wister replied that its pessimism was "quite sufficiently relieved by the two American women who prominently figure in it."[88] The play, meanwhile, was not going well. Wister's fears about his ability as a playwright were confirmed when the piece was rejected by a manager. As a result, he worked on revising the first and last acts, but remained pessimistic. The fact that Edith Wharton wrote him four complimentary pages about "Philosophy Four," his humorous short story which the Macmillan Company republished as a book in 1903, did not make up for his doubts that *The Virginian* would ever be successfully staged. In June, however, the play's prospects were much brightened when Kirk LaShelle, a successful playwright, actor and producer, agreed to take on the project. Dustin Farnham was hired to play the hero, and Frank Campeau studied for the equally important role of Trampas. Wister and LaShelle together worked out a script, and the play opened that fall in New York two days before the appearance of Henry James' latest novel, *The Ambassadors*. Although its run on Broadway was not long, *The Virginian* was a more successful drama than any James had written, and when the troupe toured the country

87 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Mar. 14, 1903.
88 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Apr. 1, 1903.

to meet with considerably more success than it had in New York, Wister accompanied it. He took *The Ambassadors* with him and read it twice, with gusto, despite his busy schedule. William James, hearing of Wister's varied activities, commented that "you really have an extraordinary mind."[89]

Yet the effort of traveling with *The Virginian*, keeping up with his ambitious schedule of writing, and meeting commitments to friends and his family, strained Wister's sometimes sensitive health. By August, 1904, he was back at his summer house in Saunderstown, writing *Lady Baltimore*, which, he thought, made "a picture of Charleston . . . no other fellow could approach."[90] His family, increased in February, 1904, with the birth of a son, pleased him, and he clearly preferred the seclusion of a novelist's work to the hectic routine of itinerant dramatist. As relief from *Lady Baltimore*, he read, talked with friends, and wrote an essay about *The Ambassadors*, the first instance of his addressing a work of Henry James in print. He sent the essay to *The Atlantic* in July, where Bliss Perry thought it "sound criticism . . . as well as a most ingenious and amusing bit of writing."[91] Perry sent a check for fifteen dollars and promised to print the piece in the "Contributor's Club" as soon as possible. The September issue carried it, unsigned, under the title of "Mr. James's Variant."

Whether or not the essay was "sound," it was certainly remarkable. It not only suggested a highly unusual reading of *The Ambassadors*, but also articulated the surprising extent to which Wister's theory of historical romance informed his perceptions. It began by noting that "Mr. James has reduced the English language to a fine spray, in which, as we gaze at it, the delicate colors and patterns gradually appear to our delighted eyes, as he intended they should."[92] Clearly, this recognition harked back to 1896 when Wister, after having talked with James in England, returned to Wyoming suddenly aware of "intricacies for which painting would have to devise some wholly new conventions and methods to be able to state at all." It was a clue to the whole highly personal context which "Mr. James's Variant" stated. Although Wister did not make the

89 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, July 1, 1903. Wister relates having lunched with James in Boston.

90 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Aug. 25, 1904.

91 Bliss Perry to Wister, July 25, 1904.

92 "Mr. James's Variant," *The Atlantic Monthly*, XCIV (September, 1904), 426.

analogy explicit, his main point was that the figure of Strether had much in common with the "Last Cavalier" who rode across Remington's canvas and the unnamed hero who galloped, drawled, and fought his way through *The Virginian*.

When Wister talked with James in 1896, he was already well grounded in the sensitivity to myth which caused him to see Yellowstone as an expression of Wagner and the western prairies as derivative from "the first chapter of Genesis." What James helped him understand was that present actuality modified the ancient myth in significant ways. Therefore, Wister prefaced his description of the brawling boomtown where he set his next story, "Destiny at Drybone," with the comment that "today, Drybone has altogether returned to the dust," and ended it with "The Cowboy's Lament," a plaintive funeral dirge.[93] Yet the story's hero, Lin McLean, did not participate in the moribund "destiny" of the boomtown. Instead, he survived, as the Virginian also would, to win his lady and receive what James called the "prosaic justice" of history. "Destiny at Drybone" showed that Wister used what James told him about "landscape" to understand the inevitable transformation of "romantic" and potentially tragic cowboys into family men—a process about which one could write musical comedies. Likewise, "Mr. James's Variant" showed how Wister applied precisely the same understanding to *The Ambassadors*.

The essay's thesis was that James had taken the "pure romance" of Don Juan and shown how modern consciousness modified the assumptions upon which that romance was grounded. Since the Don Juan cycle "evolved in pre-Darwinian days," Wister argued, it necessarily "deals in the supernatural, and winds up with a moral."[94] James, however, by shifting the story to a post-Darwinian time, was "obliged to dispense with the supernatural and get rid of the moral." Wister applied his reading rigorously. Perhaps because he was himself a student of opera, and had even attended opera with James, he asserted that the version of the Don Juan story which James' novel came closest to was Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Chad Newsom, he felt, was the libertine himself, Little Bilham, his servant Leporello. Madame de Vionnet represented the "Contesse, baronesse, marchesane, principesse" about whom Leporello sings. Strether was the

93 "Destiny at Drybone," *Harper's Magazine*, XCVI (December, 1897), 60–81.
94 "Mr. James's Variant," 426.

Commendatore, or wise advisor, whom Don Giovanni kills early in the opera, but who returns later as a ghost and finally takes Giovanni to "fiery punishment forever." Obviously, the parts did not fit exactly, but this imprecision, Wister argued, was just the point: James's "variant" of *Don Giovanni* expressed what happened when a pre-Darwinian legend encountered post-Darwinian history. It derived its "virtuosity" from the fact that it was "an ancient story told afresh."

By putting the "pure romance" of the Don Juan fable into history, Wister wrote, James consequently brought about two fundamental changes in it. First, since Mozart's Commendatore was a ghost, but "ghosts and fiery punishments will not do in a modern novel about Americans in Paris," James had to "symbolize" the ghost somehow. This he did by making Strether a character who "walks and talks as if he had never lived." Adopting the Jamesian rhetoric and terminology at last, Wister asserted that "the art of fiction has drawn no character more explicitly extinct, more consummately inanimate, more vividly dead, than poor old Strether."[95] Second, since Strether, a "hapless post-Darwinian ghost who can't be supernatural" is equally incapable of taking Chad either back to Woollett, Massachusetts, or to hell, the novel appeared to Wister to focus on the "prosaic justice" of history rather than the poetic justice of myth. James, he said, took "the original center of gravity" from *Don Giovanni* and deftly transformed it into "a center of levity" more appropriate for modern times.[96] Six months later at Charleston, Wister told James that the southern landscape and its history, which looked like "a figure prepared for romantic interment," had to be understood "not as a tragedy but as a comedy."[97] Whether or not the pupil was right, he was at least honest. He talked to and about James directly from a sense of what he felt James taught him.

When Wister's essay on *The Ambassadors* appeared in *The Atlantic*, James, who had sailed from England in August, was living with his brother in New Hampshire. He described his surroundings as "pure bucolic and Arcadian, wildly informal and un-'frilled'."[98]

95 *Ibid.*, 427.

96 *Ibid.*, 426.

97 Owen Wister, *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship* (New York, 1930), 247.

98 Henry James to W. K. Clifford, Sept. 16, 1904, in Percy Lubbock, *The Letters of Henry James* (New York, 1920), II, 18.

Wister, however, was concurrently discovering that his own life had altogether too many frills. *The Virginian* was still touring, and still doing well; publishers were still urging him to undertake many projects; he was deeply involved in *Lady Baltimore*. The embarrassment of riches was too great for Wister to bear. By the end of October, he seemed on the verge of general collapse. Early in December, Theodore Roosevelt wrote from the White House, inviting him to spend a few days in Washington, where, said Roosevelt, "I would see a good deal of you . . . and you would have plenty of chance of resting. . . . The change might really do you good." On the next day, December 3, the dreaded collapse occurred. Wister withdrew, under a physician's care, to the most isolated place he could think of, an Atlantic City hotel in December. Shortly before Christmas, he wrote to his mother that "I shall stay under until the source of my mental worry is relieved by the completion of what I am trying to write." Boredom and loneliness seemed easy to endure contrasted with "the curse of no sleep and of incessant dreams"[99] which had plagued him for months before. Molly and the children came to visit at Christmas, and Wister, taking long walks on the beach, sleeping much of the time, and even getting some writing done, grew better. On New Year's day he told his mother that "I shall come out tomorrow."[100]

On the same day Wister sent his good news from Atlantic City, Henry James sent other news, not altogether good, from New York. Sarah Wister had written to James in December, inviting him to Philadelphia for a visit, and James' letter of January 1 announced his intention of accepting. Yet for several reasons the letter was somewhat offensive. First of all, it was dictated, hardly, Mrs. Wister felt, the way to reply to a lady's friendly summons. James agreed, admitting that the "outrage" of his "legibility" sunk him "into disaster and disgrace."[101] Furthermore, the letter stated that James planned to be in Philadelphia, where he was scheduled to lecture on January 9, for one night only. Therefore, his visit with Mrs. Wister must be but a few moments long. James tried to justify himself, but only made Sarah angrier, by explaining that he was engaged to go

99 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, December, 1904.

100 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 1, 1905.

101 Typed copy of a letter from Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 1, 1905, Bryn Mawr College Library.

to Washington on January 10 to "dine on that evening with John Hay, to meet the President, and then spend eight or nine days with Henry Adams."[102] Afterward, he planned to return to New York for a visit with Edith Wharton, and again journey to Philadelphia to see Dr. William White. On that occasion, he hoped Mrs. Wister would receive him. She agreed, but not without feeling that the friendship begun at Rome in 1873 had somehow grown thin and cold.

Owen, when he emerged from his seclusion at Atlantic City, returned neither to Saunderstown nor Philadelphia. Instead, he made a hurried journey to Washington, where he "saw the President for an hour"[103] and then departed, still under a physician's care, for Camden, South Carolina, a rural community near Charleston. Toward the end of January, he described the place as "sand, cotton fields, pines, wide streets, silence."[104] During the days, Wister rode and rested. Each evening, he played dominoes "sedately" with Fred Whitehall, an old friend, and went to bed promptly at 9:30. George Brett of the Macmillan Company dropped in for a visit, and, after Wister took him driving, listened while Wister read "all of *Lady Baltimore*" aloud. "He sat with a ceaseless smile as he listened," wrote Wister: "He says it's entirely new & he wishes there was some way to give it a binding & appearance that should fit and announce its quality."[105] Yet Brett also warned Wister that "you must look out about some phrases which sound like Henry James." Amused by the remark, Wister relayed it to his mother, and enjoined her to "tell my elder brother Henry this."

James' visit to Philadelphia was so hectic, however, and Mrs. Wister found it so depressing, that Brett's comment probably never came up. James came to Philadelphia directly from New York, where he was "harrowed and ravaged by an appalling experience of American transcendent *dentistry*."[106] He arrived during a blizzard. After talking with Dr. White, he visited the University and the State Penitentiary. Later, he adjourned to Butler Place, the Wister family home in the nearby countryside, where he sat with his "back to the fire" among guests who seemed to him embodiments of "gallantry,

102 *Ibid.*
103 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 21, 1905.
104 *Ibid.*
105 *Ibid.*
106 Henry James to Edmund Gosse, Feb. 16, 1905, in Lubbock, *Letters*, II, 25.

hilarity, social disposability . . . [and] the grace of the sporting instinct."[107] At least this was the way he put it in *The American Scene*. Privately, however, he described Philadelphia as "poor dear queer flat" and "comfortable."[108] In the gathering at Butler Place, Mrs. Wister felt "out of it." To one of the guests, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, it seemed that James' long absence from the United States had modified his appearance. The novelist looked neither English nor American, said Mitchell, "but like a French prefect in a country French town."[109] As family doctor and close friend, he wrote to Owen his professional diagnosis that James "has suffered from some mysterious degeneration which shows in his style."

Wister thought this "interesting," but couldn't agree. On January 29, he wrote a letter to his mother in which he countered Mitchell's theory with one of his own: "I think Mr. James tries to say several things simultaneously, attempting to give a contrapuntal effect of sundry ideas happening together—superimposed."[110] He felt, in other words, that the method was not neurotic, but musical. Shortly afterward, he wrote to Mitchell himself with essentially the same idea. James, he admitted, was "in essence inscrutable," but he felt nonetheless that "our language has no artist more serious or austere at this moment." The difficulty was that James attempted "a certain, very particular form of the impossible," trying to make language do what it was incapable of doing: "He would like to put several sentences on top of each other so that you could read them all at once, and get all at once the various shadings and complexities, instead of getting them consecutively as the mechanical nature of his medium compels." Nonetheless, Wister thought *The Ambassadors* "a prodigy of skill," and insisted that James' later books were "the work of a master." The "key" to understanding this, he explained, was an awareness of James' technique:

> He does not undertake to tell a story but to deal with a situation, a single situation. Beginning (in his scheme) at the center of this situation, he works outward, intricately and exhaustively, spinning his web around every part of the situation, every little necessary part no matter how slight, until he gradually presents to you the organic whole, worked out.[111]

107 *The American Scene*, 291.
108 Letter of Feb. 16, 1905, in Lubbock, *Letters*, II, 26.
109 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 29, 1905.
110 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Jan. 29, 1905.
111 Anna Robeson Burr, *Weir Mitchell* (New York, 1930), 323.

As a "concrete demonstration of the method," Wister recommended "The Turn of the Screw." Meanwhile, James journeyed south from Philadelphia into Virginia and the Carolinas. After a week at the famous Biltmore Hotel in the Great Smoky Mountains, he left for Charleston and the coast. Sometime between January 29 and February 5, he visited Wister at Camden.

Sarah had written to Owen describing the Philadelphia meeting with James and expressing her feeling that James slighted her. On February 5, Owen replied: "I can not believe that [Mr. James] was not glad to see you and that he has not the same regard for you that he always had. It would have been easy to evade Butler Place gracefully and imperceptibly, & would merely have involved his renouncing Dr. White." Wister asked whether James' behavior might not be the result of his being "simply bewildered and water logged with too many people." After all, he pointed out, James had "for several months . . . sat in a kaleidoscope, buzzing ceaselessly." This was "a great change from his previous hermit life at Rye." The impressions, said Wister, came from seeing James: "He was so warm, so affectionate, spoke of a likeness in me to my father which he had never seen before, and altogether was so much 'in touch' with us that I am sure you can set *your* impressions down to kaleidoscope and teeth."[112] Wister, refreshed by his country life, planned to leave for Charleston on February 11.

James arrived at Charleston "early in the chill morning"[113] of February 12. The experience, as he saw the town "shabby and sordid, and lost in the scale of space as the quotable line is lost in a dull epic,"[114] was mostly unpleasant. The railroads didn't help, leading James to comment that, "Your luggage, in America, is looked after, but you are not." Yet the ordeal was rendered at least bearable by "a friend who, by having promised to arrive from the interior of the State the night before, gave one a pretext for seeking up and down." Unfortunately, the "friend" was not to be found, so James "proceeded from door to door in the sweet blank freshness of the day,"[115] until he discovered that Wister "*had* arrived over night, according to my hope, and had only happened to lodge him-

112 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Feb. 5, 1905.
113 *The American Scene*, 380.
114 *Ibid.*, 382.
115 *Ibid.*, 387.

self momentarily out of my ken." The two men spent the day together, visiting old acquaintances, seeing the town, and talking alternately about America and Wister's new novel.

Wister wrote that James was "much taken with this place," and commented on the same "warm sunshine" James noticed.[116] With the autobiographical narrator of *Lady Baltimore* doubtless much in his mind, Wister said of James that "I showed him everything." James repaid the tour with "much valuable criticism," advising Wister to resist his impulse toward historical accuracy in *Lady Baltimore* enough "not to say *Charleston* at all," but instead to "give it a fictitious name," advice which Wister followed. But Wister also had something other than the tour to offer James. James' question about Charleston in particular and the South in general was whether it comprised "but the historic Desert without the historic Mausoleum?" What he wanted was "some small inkling (a mere specimen-scrap would do) of the sense, as I have to keep forever calling my wanton synthesis, of 'the South before the War'."[117] Partly by just being what he was, "a Northerner," as James put it, "of Southern descent"—but mostly by saying what he said about southern history, Wister answered the question and provided the "inkling" James wanted.

Having written a biography of General Grant, Wister knew that the Civil War "was a tragedy which had broken many hearts both North and South," but when he first saw Charleston, the town seemed to him "*the* tragedy of all, except Lincoln" because "whatever these people had done . . . obliteration was a heavier punishment than they deserved."[118] In other words, Wister's initial impression was precisely the same as James', who was disappointed when his romantic vision of the South came into contact with its "shabby and sordid" actuality. Wister had the opportunity to repay James for the service of opening his eyes in 1896, and he took advantage of it in precisely the same way as James had, by pointing out that the imprecision between the "pure romance" of legend and the more complex stuff of experience was a historical quantity which changed the tragic into the comic. He explained it later in another book, much as he must have put it to James in 1905:

116 Wister to Sarah B. Wister, Feb. 15, 1905.
117 *The American Scene*, 387.
118 *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship*, 246.

[The South] had been founded, true enough, on the crime of slavery, but this crime was not its own, it was part of its inheritance from England. Moreover, I had found in Charleston, and wherever I had gone in the South, many more people, whether urban or rustic, who were the sort of people I was . . . with whom I felt just as direct a national kinship as I felt with the Western cowpunchers.[119]

For these reasons, Wister said, he wrote *Lady Baltimore* "not as a tragedy but as a comedy" in much the same way as he felt James shifted *Don Giovanni*'s "center of gravity" to a "center of levity" in *The Ambassadors*, by putting the myth into time. James, therefore, as he stood looking out into Charleston's harbor and listening to Wister talk, found that "everything differed, somehow, from one's old conceived image."[120] He was quite correct in noting that "my tuition, at the hands of my ingenious comrade, was the very best it was possible to have." At last the "intwisted . . . imagination" was not only discovered, but began to make actual semantic sense. What Wister communicated to James at Charleston was identical with what James communicated to Wister nine years before at Point Hill.

V

What James and Wister discovered at Charleston was that they had a surprising amount in common. Many things contributed to the discovery, but one of them was doubtless the fact that Wister, at forty-five, could no longer be mistaken even by James for one of "les jeunes," and James, at sixty-two, probably seemed closer to Wister in years than he ever had before. Both men were ageing, and for both the Charleston meeting constituted something like a "great divide." After *Lady Baltimore*, Wister finished no more novels. After *The American Scene*, James occupied himself primarily with critical and biographical essays and revisions of his earlier works. The "intwisted . . . imagination" was a historical quantity like any other, subject to the same "prosaic justice" which made romantic Charleston look like "the quotable line . . . in a dull epic." Only by being historical could the quantity be discovered at all. And only by dissolving could the quantity be historical. Yet it lingered on

119 *Ibid.*, 246–247.
120 *The American Scene*, 397.

awhile as memory, until death destroyed even that and left only printed pages.

Because it was still happening, however, neither James nor Wister recognized the watershed for what it was. After two days in Charleston, James boarded the train for Jacksonville. Wister intended to go with him as far as Savannah, Georgia, but decided against it because he felt tired. James wrote to his friend, Edmund Gosse, that "I shall be able to do here little more than get my saturation," and looked forward to "the so yearned-for peace of Lamb House."[121] He felt that America was "interesting" rather than "thrilling," but Wister had, after all, told him that "everything is more really curious and vivid in the West," and he was going there himself to find out. In March, he wrote to Edward Warren from Chicago of that city's "*ugliness* . . . (vast mechanical, industrial, social, financial) . . . *infinite* (of potential size and form, and even of actual;) black, smoky, *old*-looking, very like some preternaturally *boomed* Manchester or Glasgow lying beside a colossal lake (Michigan) of hard pale green jade, and putting forth railway antennae of maddening complexity and gigantic length."[122] After "17 days of the 'great Middle West' " he was almost desperately eager to leave for Los Angeles. Southern California astonished him by its "delicious difference from the rest of the U. S."[123] His stay, however, was "condemned to bitterest brevity." After a quick journey up the coast to Seattle, he returned to his brother's house at Cambridge. In August, he was back at Rye.

The next year, 1906, *Lady Baltimore* was finally printed. Wister took advantage of the occasion for a brief holiday in Europe, where he stayed with James for two days at Lamb House in May. They talked of James' western trip, and Wister tried to convince James that he should write stories about the West—something which James refused to do, and which later shocked Theodore Roosevelt when he heard about it. At the end of the month, James wrote to Sarah saying that whereas he had enjoyed seeing Owen he would like even more to see her. Shortly afterward, he also wrote to Owen, mentioning Hamlin Garland, who was in England at the time. James thought him "well-meaning . . . avid . . . patient" and "truly *nought* as a

121 Letter of Feb. 16, 1905, in Lubbock, *Letters*, II, 26–27.
122 Henry James to Edward Warren, Mar. 19, 1905, *ibid.*, 31–32.
123 Henry James to Mrs. William Jones, Apr. 5, 1905, *ibid.*, 33.

joy of life."[124] Wister agreed, having earlier described Garland as "a friendly intentioned person" who unfortunately displayed offensive "ignorance and bad taste."[125]

Throughout 1906 and 1907, James and Wister corresponded more or less regularly, discussing friends, books and the weather. Sarah Wister briefly considered translating Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* into French, until James told her that the translation had already been arranged for "with some Gallic expert *man*."[126] In February, 1907, *The American Scene*, with its thinly veiled references to Wister, appeared, and shortly afterward the Macmillan Company printed Wister's short biography, *The Seven Ages of Washington*. James, to whom Wister was finally sending inscribed copies of his works, wrote to say that "you have done the dear old boy a great service just by showing what a dear old boy he was."[127] At the time, Wister was involved in attempts to reform Philadelphia city government. The October issue of *Everybody's Magazine* carried his article on "The Keystone Crime," first in a long series of Wister's reform essays and speeches.

In 1908, Wister even ran for the Philadelphia City Council—after being assured that he had "not the slightest chance" of being elected.[128] Commenting on the campaign, James was pessimistic. "Art," he said, was often ineffective. "Science" seemed "to play too straight into the hands of the swindlers." He concluded that "the only thing left is friendship."[129] A month later, Wister needed all the friendship he could get. From March until the middle of August he was confined to bed with a mysterious fever which no doctor, including Weir Mitchell and William Osler, could diagnose or treat. Sarah Wister was also ill, and Theodore Roosevelt wrote from the White House with the hope that she would "soon be well."[130] This, however, was Sarah Wister's last illness. While the stormy, uneven friendship begun at Rome in 1873 was ending at Philadelphia with

124 Henry James to Wister, Aug. 22, 1906.

125 Wister's note on a letter from Hamlin Garland pasted in Volume III, 33, of Wister's scrapbook, "Babel."

126 Henry James to Sarah B. Wister, Dec. 10, 1906.

127 Henry James to Wister, Feb. 2, 1908.

128 *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship*, 267.

129 Henry James to Wister, Feb. 2, 1908.

130 *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship*, 271.

Sarah Wister's death, James revisited Rome and found it less attractive than before. The place Sarah once filled in his affections was now occupied by Edith Wharton, but time's "prosaic justice" did not allow the romance to develop. Two years later, in 1910, James was seized with a mysterious illness much like that which troubled Wister in 1908.

When he was able to get out of bed in August, Wister went to work on short stories for his next book, *Members of the Family*, but his convalescence was long and difficult. James offered the opinion that "what is imperative for you is to diagnose too much Philadelphia, and no mistake!"[131] James, who suffered during the winter "a bad bout . . . of an 'anginal' and cardial sort," and recovered, jauntily enjoined Wister to "look at *me*." In the "little final corner" of the letter, James struck "as attractive a pose as I can strike," cried "begone dull care!" and commanded Wister to "take . . . passage for refreshing Rye." But Wister stayed in Philadelphia. At the end of 1909, James still hoped "with fierce intensity" that he was "planning and tending somehow hitherward." James warned that "the years melt away, and the changes multiply, and the families (some of them) diminish."[132] Very soon after, his own health broke. William James and his family came to Rye immediately, but William was also ill. By the end of August, it became evident that William had to return to the United States. Henry, rather than be separated from his brother, decided to come too.

Shortly after James wrote in December, 1909, Wister had a relapse, yet he felt well enough by May to receive James, who came down from New Hampshire for several days. James, who was also emerging from his state of depression, was charmed by Wister's family, and encouraged by the talk. For the summer, Wister planned a trip to Wyoming, his first in eleven years. He hoped that the "curative regions" would work their magic on him again as they had in 1885. After their Philadelphia meeting, James wrote to Wister that "I have the vivid assurance of all that you have to get better and better, to get beautifully well for." He was sure that Wister would "live and labor and triumph" because Wister had "more inspiration

131 Henry James to Wister, Easter, 1909.

132 Henry James to Wister, Dec. 26, 1902, in Lubbock, *Letters*, II, 149.

and reward than your poor old (yet nonetheless intending and persisting and all affectionate) Henry James."[133]

The brave words proceeded directly from James' "romantic feeling" about Wister and the West, but when Wister went West that summer, he discovered that the West itself was going its own way while the romantic feeling stayed pretty much the same. The train he rode on was "half passenger, half freight, no Pullman." It was towed by an "ancient locomotive with a big wide smokestack." Even down to "the original pattern of newsboy with bad novels, bad candy, bad bananas," it was "like the trains of other days."[134] Yet it was also like the "Last Cavalier" on Remington's canvas, for solid though it was, it traveled across a landscape of dreams. As Wister sat in it, tired but eager, he smelled "the first whiff of the sagebrush," and felt the thrill of a renewal like that of twenty years before, when he woke up to the fact that the air at Colonel Wolcott's ranch was "better than all other air." Curiously, though, he noted this time as he had not before that "the past became visible." He saw "scores and hundreds" of antelope "only a little way off; a sort of cinnamon and amber color . . . transparent and phantom like, with pale legs." They ran, becoming "receding dots of motion," and disappeared. Then Wister realized that "no antelope were there."[135] For the first time, he understood Remington's painting. "What you seek," he told himself, "what your eyes have been straining to see, is yourself at twenty, your youth before you ever thought that it . . . would pass." Six years before, at the height of his own career, Wister had half jokingly described Lambert Strether as a man who acted as though he "never lived." Now, he recognized with astonishment that he himself was subject to the same joke: "I am a ghost," he admitted.

James, who still looked corporeal enough to make an ocean voyage, returned to Rye in September. Several newspapers in the East carried obituaries of Wister, who was rumored to have died at Jackson's Hole. Even though it might have been "poetic justice," the rumor was not true, and Wister, for all his talk about being "a ghost," was back at Philadelphia by the end of November. He felt

133 Henry James to Wister, May 17, 1911.
134 *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship*, 294.
135 *Ibid.*, 295.

better. He toured Europe with his family and wrote political essays. Prompted by the success of *Lady Baltimore*, he was planning a novel about Philadelphia life. For the time being, James' prophecy of "labor and triumph," seemed, at least in some qualified way, to be coming true. James, likewise, remained cheerful and vigorous despite recurring physical troubles. He planned a long novel of American life, part of which he may even have thought about setting in the West. In 1913, Molly Wister was again expecting a baby, to be born in the fall. Obviously, youth had ways of renewing itself even though romantics like James and Wister sometimes talked as though they thought it was gone forever. And even James, who had his seventieth birthday in April, felt that he had "reached the right point for living over again."[136] But Molly Wister died in childbirth.

The five surviving children and their father spent a dreary winter. To help relieve the shock, Wister planned to go to Europe in the spring with the Jack Mitchells, friends from his college days. Wister himself bore up surprisingly well, forcing himself to remain active in politics and social life, and even continuing to plan his Philadelphia novel. He wrote to James, who replied as usual with sanity and humor. "Of course you are living and going on," James wrote. "Your life must be full, very full—and it's not your memories and your aches that will make it less so." He predicted that the Philadelphia novel would "rise, in high salience, to the surface again," and was happy to hear that he might see the Wisters in the spring. He had moved from Rye to a "modest but cheerful flat" in Chelsea "over the admirably picturesque and animated Thames" which reminded him of the Grand Canal. The *angina pectoris* which bothered him was "chronic and very active" but not beyond the reach of wit. It was, he said, "a stiff business . . . a grave reality." James took "comfort and cheer" in Wister's strength and laid his hand "ever so gently on the handsome heads, fair and dark" of each of the children.[137] With the torment and reassurance of their long relationship so thoroughly united, James and Wister were finally friends, because, as James himself earlier put it, "the only thing left" was "friendship." The rest is briefly told.

[136] Henry James to "two hundred and seventy friends," Apr. 21, 1913, in Lubbock, *Letters*, II, 312.

[137] Henry James to Wister, Feb. 23, 1914.

That summer, the War, which James did not survive, broke out. Wister, who began the European trip as planned, beat a hurried retreat from Germany and crossed the Atlantic in a ship closely pursued by two German submarines. A year later, James became a British subject. About a year and a half after that, his illness became "a grave reality" indeed, and James died. But James' little joke about the illness was still funny, and Wister's theory of historical romance still functioned. "The Last Cavalier" still rode across Remington's canvas, and the curious dislocation of meaning which occurred between that picture and its title still illustrated the same thing: The "intwisted . . . imagination" was precisely that quality which, even while it dissolved, made it possible to regard a historical event *as history*, "not as a tragedy, but as a comedy." Wister showed that he still knew this in 1928, when he wrote a story called "At the Sign of the Last Chance," which turned on the custom in frontier towns of naming saloons at one end of the street First Chance and those at the other end Last Chance to accommodate cowboys out on a spree.[138] But Wister gave the story a modern setting in which both the once booming town and the once thriving saloons were defunct. Only a group of derelict old men gathered at the Last Chance to swap stories with a barkeep named Henry. Henry recognized that the days when "beards were golden and . . . betting was high" were over, the "romance . . . finished." As a result, he removed the cracked and peeling sign from its place over his door and buried it. The act, of course, like the title of Remington's painting, was a symbolic termination, but like James' comment on the "grave reality" of his illness, it also contained a joke, for the process which it terminated refused to stop. After the burial, Henry went out "to stroll around" before retiring. Tomorrow, he would swap more yarns. If Wister wasn't thinking of Henry James when he wrote the story, he should have been. It was his own last chance to put James where he had always wanted him to be.

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138 This story first appeared in *Cosmopolitan* LXXXIV (February, 1928), 66–75, and was continued in later pages of the same number. It was later collected in *When West Was West.*