

*Culture and
conduct in
the novels
of*

HENRY
JAMES

LWYN BERLAND

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Preface

This is a study of Henry James's fiction in relationship to his particular view of civilization as culture. I believe this view was of great importance in determining his treatment of the novelist's material: human beings in their relations with each other, with their societies and institutions, and with themselves. His view of civilization affected a number of his characteristic fictional themes and concerns, and I think it important to demonstrate their connections.

The artist's vision of human experience affects not only his themes, of course, but with equal significance his forms and techniques, insofar as they serve to organize and to render meaningful the experience with which he deals. I shall not discuss in any comprehensive way the distinctive technical achievements of James's fiction; I think this omission justified not only on the grounds of the considerable body of formal criticism already in existence, but also because of the concentration of focus of my study. I have dealt with technical matters whenever I feel them to bear particularly on my central subject.

The ideas developed here stem from my reading of the novels themselves. Although more than one critic has observed before now that James cared intensely for civilization, no critic I have read has developed this idea adequately or, more important, demonstrated its permeating effects on James's fiction.

I am not particularly concerned with the bearings of James's biography on his novels, and the biography itself has already been well documented. I have thought it important to think afresh about the tradition, or traditions, in which James's work was founded; to that degree this study is concerned with literary and social history. My concern is not with James's specific debts

and borrowings, which are comparatively few, but with his concerns and commitments, which are many.

I begin with a general discussion of James's concern with civilization, and with his tendency to see civilization primarily as culture, rather than as a wider social, historical, institutional (and cultural) construct. I am interested in demonstrating that James's dependence on a nineteenth-century aesthetic tradition is larger than has previously been recognized. This aesthetic movement, especially as it found expression in the writings of Matthew Arnold, seems to me most helpful in defining and in understanding James's own commitments and the framework of his fiction.

I go on to consider a number of representative themes and motifs in James's fiction in the light of his central vision of civilization as culture. Then I turn to a consideration of those novels which seem to me most interesting both in themselves and as illuminating James's most characteristic and important themes.

I begin with James's first novel, *Roderick Hudson*, which stakes out, if with some immaturity, James's central and recurring subjects. In it I find opportunity for considering some important questions about the literary traditions most significant in shaping James's own literary career.

I have given a large part of my argument to a close study of *The Portrait of a Lady*. The intrinsic merit of the novel justifies this attention, I believe; further, it provides the best single occasion for an examination of James's view of civilization as culture as it affected his art. Readers who agree with my treatment of this novel will find that it illuminates many others as well.

The Portrait of a Lady treats the idea of civilization directly, and richly, through the strategy of the international theme. A second, less central approach which James explored for dealing with his interests is the dramatic confrontation of different attitudes toward, or conceptions of, civilization. Views which are alternative or hostile to his own are given fictional voice through various characters whose attitudes and behaviour may be examined for their consequences. James's conception of

civilization was a minority view, held in the face of stronger and more popular claims, the errors or inadequacies of which James wished to expose to fictional demonstration. *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, and *The Tragic Muse* are all novels in which James tests or defends his own special feelings about civilization in relation to other views. These novels are the major works which follow after *The Portrait of a Lady*, where James's own ideas and commitments to civilization as culture are most fully developed and explored.

James returned to the international theme and to his central concern in *The Ambassadors*, but with the added complexity of vision and of style that justifies the usual grouping of late novels. Furthermore, certain ideas always present in James became more important in the late novels: for example, the themes of acquisition, of appropriation, of the 'modern love of things'. For this reason, I have related my discussion of *The Ambassadors* to *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ivory Tower*. I have not included *The Wings of the Dove*, however much I might welcome an occasion for discussing both its marvels and its lapses. For while James deals with the theme of civilization in it, again on the international level, the novel adds nothing and changes nothing that is relevant to my concern in this study.

There remains a large group of novels which are peripheral to my subject, though they include in their number some very good works. I have not undertaken to discuss these except incidentally where there is some special relevance to my central argument. In some of these novels James is interested in describing and evaluating single elements of the civilization which he finds in moving between America and Europe and which in themselves are incomplete or fragmentary. *The Europeans*, a very good novel, and *The Reverberator*, a much slighter work altogether, are both examples of this more limited treatment. Other novels look at the manners and conventions of the society of his own time which, satirically or tragically, he examined for their effects on the lives of his characters. The early *Washington Square* and the later *The Awkward Age* and *What Maisie Knew* all look at the impact on culture and on conduct of the manners of his age.

I should not like to suggest that James was occupied in constructing a systematic study of civilization, working out definitions, noting exceptions, labelling attributes, and all the rest. There is no conscious organization of an over-all pattern in James's novels such as, for instance, one finds in Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*, or even in the looser organization of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels and stories. James did have a central vision of the importance of civilization and its bearings on the human condition, a vision which informed his representative themes, actions, characters, techniques. This is quite a different matter, however, from a conscious plan or organization. Indeed, in approaching the creative impulse, which so often laughs at diagrams and which confounds the critic's schema, it is well to remember the words in which Lambert Strether pays his high tribute to Mme de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors*:

he felt the roughness of the formula, because, by one of the shortcuts of genius, she had taken all his categories by surprise.

I have used the New York edition of James's fiction, and the Macmillan edition of 1923, as my texts. The latter includes all the fiction published in James's lifetime which for one reason or another was omitted from the New York edition. I have not given page references in the body of this study for the innumerable quotations from the novels; to do so, I felt, would be too tedious and distracting for the reader. References are given for all material drawn from James's criticism, notebooks, letters, and autobiographical volumes, as well as for material derived from secondary sources.

Parts of this study have appeared, in somewhat modified versions, in *The University Review*, *The Cambridge Journal*, *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, and *The Wascana Review*. I acknowledge with thanks their permission to reproduce this material here.

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a leave fellowship, both of which facilitated my work on James.

For their criticism and encouragement I am most grateful to Mrs Joan Bennett of Cambridge University, to Peter Burbidge, to the late Dr Oscar Cargill, to Dr David Daiches, to Dr Julian Markels, and to Allen Tate.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the largest debt of all, in more ways than I can possibly say, to my wife Jayne Berland.

What are the conditions that produce a classical national author. He must, in the first place, be born in a great commonwealth . . . He must find his nation in a high state of civilization, so that he will have no difficulty in obtaining for himself a high degree of culture. He must find much material already collected and ready for his use, and a large number of more or less perfect attempts made by his predecessors. And finally, there must be such a happy conjuncture of outer and inner circumstances that he will not have to pay dearly for his mistakes, but that in the prime of his life he may be able to see the possibilities of a great theme and to develop it according to some uniform plan into a well-arranged and well-constructed literary work.

Goethe

I can't look at the English-American world, or feel about them, any more, save as a big Anglo-Saxon total, destined to such an amount of melting together that an insistence on their differences becomes more and more idle and pedantic; and that melting together will come the faster the more one takes it for granted and treats the life of the two countries as continuous and more or less convertible, or at any rate as simply different chapters of the same general subject. Literature, fiction in particular, affords a magnificent arm for such taking for granted, and one may so do an excellent work with it. I have not the least hesitation in saying that I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am at a given moment ~~an~~ American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as I do with both countries,) and so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized.

Henry James

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I

The major theme

THE PROGRESS OF CRITICISM

Even if Henry James were not as *present* in every consideration of modern fiction as he is, too much has been written about him during the last fifty or sixty years to justify another re-evaluation now. The writing about James in these years provides, with its divergent assumptions and conclusions, if not a consistent evaluation of James's fiction, at least some curious insights into contemporary cultural history.

What makes this history so interesting in relation to James is not so much its variety as its contradictions. Novelists manifestly second-rate have had their defenders; novelists clearly very good have been attacked. But no other novelist in English has had the ambiguous triumph of being called the very best and – in terms of really serious claims – the worst; the richest and the dullest, the most meaningful and the most devoid of substance. If the enterprising reader will but look for them he will find critics enough who write off Scott as too boring, Dickens as too vulgar, Sterne as too sentimental, or Jane Austen as – too much a lady. But these objections are rarely at the extreme, just as the praise given them, with a possible exception in Miss Austen's case, is rarely unqualified. But when one gets to Henry James, nothing is taken for granted; there is no peace in the land. He has been called a fraud and a genius. And while these terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they are meant to be so in James's case.

Certain aspects of James's fiction antagonize readers, whether they happen to be literary critics or not. And there are elements in the contemporary cultural tradition which are strong enough

to make readers, even when they are not antagonized, feel that they should be. One consequence is that a good deal of James criticism is not merely discriminatory, weighing the good and the bad and striking a balance, but apologetic. It insists so strongly on the good that any mention of the bad is embarrassing. Or it deals so extravagantly with the bad that even the hostile critic feels compelled to buttress his attack with a machinery of apologetics, most frequently that of social and biographical explanation.

I want then to be unambiguous. I think it is worth insisting that the superior James novels rank with the very best of modern fiction, indeed, with the best of *all* fiction in English. At the same time, certain limitations emerge when one looks at James's collected fiction as a single created world, granting for the moment that this is really possible and not merely a critical cliché.

Excepting *The Princess Casamassima*, where the protagonist is a London artisan (though protected against mere plebeianism by an elaborate apologetic of being the bastard of an English lord), and several stories – 'Brooksmith', 'In the Cage', and 'The Bench of Desolation' most notably – the too exclusive concern in James's fiction is with characters from the upper middle class and aristocracy, a concentration which renders his world rather less full than one might wish.¹ True, his characters are sometimes without money, but they are apt to represent a fallen or embarrassed gentility; they think and act as aristocrats. As a consequence, there is not the richness of human reference, the completeness of lived experience, which the novel perhaps more than any other literary form is able to provide.

Further, his important characters tend too consistently to be extremely intelligent, subtle, and sensitive, remarkably conscious and articulate. James usually can manage a willing suspension of disbelief within each single novel, but when the reader comes to think of these people as a gallery of 'represent-

¹ Even in these stories there are usually special circumstances: Brooksmith is a butler spoiled by his civilized associations for his 'proper' station; his poverty seems simply accidental rather than essential.

tative' men and women, a certain amount of resistance, if not of revulsion, is almost inevitable. Given the dismal spectacle of the contemporary naturalistic novel, I should not wish to argue for the statistical average, nor even for the formula which William Dean Howells was defending in James's time: 'The simple, natural, and honest',² a formula which no doubt sounds better than its applications in fiction have, apart from Tolstoy, ever managed to be. What needs to be argued for is a sense of the variousness of the human condition. I wish that James did not so persistently see nobility of character in terms so indissolubly wedded to acute personal awareness and intelligence. When James insists that Hamlet and Lear are 'finely aware' and that this quality of articulate consciousness 'makes absolutely the intensity of their adventure, gives the maximum of sense to what befalls them'³ we can hardly disagree. Neither might we argue against a comparative indifference to what happens to the 'stupid, the coarse, and the blind', although it might be less chilling to say rather that we do not care in the same way. On the other hand, both Hamlet and Lear are capable of failures of intelligence which James's protagonists might blush to admit. But a more serious complication in this comparison is that in confronting life Shakespeare's two heroes are capable of a full vitality which James's characters might (one sometimes fears) also blush to admit.

Although James's protagonists have among them a certain range, they tend to be too much alike in their high controlled refinement. Although James does invent simpler characters for comic relief, his 'fools who minister' to the characters that 'count', they are usually too distinctly compartmentalized as comic relief, too manifestly props to the attention which rightly belongs to the happy few. A pantheon of intellectual and moral giants is doubtless more edifying than a world of grubs, as found in certain exponents of literary naturalism, but not necessarily more representative of human actuality.

James was aware that many readers were suspicious of, or hostile toward, his representative characters. His criticism, like

2 As in chapter 2 of Howells's *Criticism and Fiction* (New York, 1891).

3 Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, p. ix.

that of T. S. Eliot, is primarily an exploration and defence of his own artistic intentions. His self-justification for his characters lies in the exercise of what he calls 'operative irony': his characters are not as men usually are, he admits, but they are as men might well be:

It's . . . a campaign, of a sort, on behalf of the something better . . . that blessedly, as it is assumed, *might* be . . . It implies and projects the possible other case, the case rich and edifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain.⁴

James disliked artistic campaigns in general, and his critical theories were all opposed to the didactic. Nevertheless, James's fiction is in its very essence a campaign on behalf of the 'something better', and his conception of character, though it may be thought to limit his range of human reference, is dictated by his central thematic concerns.

The very bulk of James criticism is prodigious. The amount of speculating, of theorizing, of false tracks laid down and then corrected, is staggering, especially when one remembers into what neglect James's fiction had fallen during his lifetime, or reads of his own battered awareness of that neglect. Still, a certain amount of the damage accomplished by some critics has been repaired by others. It may be useful here to remember Dr Johnson on Shakespeare:

The chief desire of him that comments an author is to show how much other commentators have corrupted and obscured him. The opinions prevalent in one age as truths above the reach of controversy are confuted and rejected in another, and rise again to reception in remoter times. Thus the human mind is kept in motion without progress.⁵

The much-advertised critical revolution of the twentieth century has meant mainly that Johnson's cycles of succeeding ages have been compressed into the arguments and tergiversations of succeeding issues of the quarterly reviews.

⁴ Preface to *The Lesson of the Master*, p. x.

⁵ Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare*', in *Eighteenth Century Critical Essays*, ed. Scott Elledge (Ithaca, N.Y., 1961), vol. II, p. 675.

Some progress may be claimed, nonetheless. The earlier and far-fetched charge that James was fundamentally anti-American in his sympathies has been disproved. Many critics have rallied to point out the frequent – indeed, sometimes embarrassing – moral triumphs of Americans in the conflicts of the famous international novels. Christopher Newman, Isabel Archer, Lambert Strether, Milly Theale, all emerge from their respective tales as better people than the Europeans with whom they deal. There is a hierarchy even among his Americans: those who remain loyal to their roots are better than the alienated, or deracinated, or superficially Europeanized, who actually are apt to be the most ominous characters in James's fiction. Christina Light, Madame Merle, Gilbert Osmond, Charlotte Stant – these are all Europeans by adoption, but by adoption only. Any claim that James categorically preferred the European aristocracy to his American characters can proceed only from naïveté or prejudice. It is necessary, in fact, to recognize the opposite prejudice as it functions in *The American*, for instance, or in *The Golden Bowl*.

On aesthetic and formalistic grounds, the economy and discipline, the tightening and deepening of fictional form, the self-consciousness of technique have been major factors contributing to the appreciation of James, and explain particularly the preference for the late novels as expressed directly or implicitly by such critics as Ezra Pound, Percy Lubbock, and F. O. Matthiessen. The last three novels, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* – as well as the two unfinished novels, *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past* – are claimed to represent James at his best. I consider *The Golden Bowl* essentially a failure, and *The Wings of the Dove* both very moving and very flawed. But I want to avoid the 'either-or' trap which too many critics have fallen into when arguing for a given Jamesian phase or period. It seems to me more useful here to be descriptive of important differences. The late works minimize 'story' in its traditional sense, substituting a deeper and deeper probing into 'character'. Character is not developed in a traditional focus on the individual so much as on a creation of character in terms of *others*. We are given not individuals

so much as relationships, though the reader may ultimately remove from the tight context of their various relationships the rather fabulous individuals who make up the Jamesian world. The prose is difficult, convolute, analytical. It becomes more mannered and more personal than the early style. The demands of narration, exposition, or dialogue may vary, but the late voice is always the voice of the master.

The dialogue moves slowly, sometimes tortuously, through the steady intimations of what is never spoken at all. It progresses like agony in an echo-chamber, where each character, through interrogative repetitions of the other's phrases or sentences, forces still further revelations which seem impossible for direct statement. Or the characters leap across the chasms of the unspoken as on ice floes in the raging currents of the portentous.

The much-dressed symbolism and imagery of the late novels are not different from, but consonant with, the other developments of technique. The tendency toward intensive concentration within a limited frame is marked in plot, in situation, in characterization, *and* in the stylistic techniques employed for exploring all of these. The symbolism tends to be as sustained as the virtuoso passages of introspection, of investigated motive, of analysed response. While a good deal can be learned from a study of the later symbolism, it is a mistake, I think, to define the difference between early novels and late simply in terms of imagery.⁶ James's use of symbolism and imagery, especially in the later novels, is one aspect of an increasingly complex and intensified concern with form, and this is related to the development of idea and of vision. What impresses me is not a qualitative change in James's use of symbolism, but the wonderful consonance expressed in almost every aspect of his art.

The increasing complexity and concentration of vision and form in the later novels of James is not necessarily all gain, however. Lambert Strether is a conception superior to Chris-

⁶ An eminent example of 'image analysis' of James's later fiction is M. Allott's 'Symbolism and image in the later work of Henry James', *Essays in Criticism*, III (1953), pp. 321-36.

topher Newman, certainly. But is Milly Theale really superior to Isabel Archer? The cracked golden bowl in the later novel is a richer and subtler symbol than Roderick Hudson's statue of 'Thirst' in the earlier. But the imagery which evokes Prince Amerigo in *The Golden Bowl* as a Palladian church, and the much-extolled symbol of the Pagoda – Maggie Verver's vision of the relationships of the four major characters – colourful as these may be in their own terms, are really not convincing vehicles for their human analogies. The overwrought inadequacy of the images is only one measure of the inadequacy of the novel as a whole, and suggests that in James's fiction symbolism and imagery are not determining causes – as they often are in poetry – but elements of great but secondary value for enriching, substantiating, and more closely defining other fictional elements. If the Pagoda image is dazzling, it is also contrived, over-extended, and finally false to the human value it represents. Significantly, the reader can see the same dazzling but false qualities working in the novel as a whole.

One other technical matter is worth mentioning in tracing James's development. The burden that James places on the *ficelle* – the friendly confidant who is involved only marginally in the action – becomes heavier in the later fiction. Borrowed from the drama, from the conventions of chorus and *confidante*, these persons are messengers and expositors. They elicit information and feelings. As James tries to push his fiction ever closer to the conditions of drama (and it is interesting that James's 'drama' almost inevitably means French classical drama), the *ficelle* becomes more and more important, and sometimes irritatingly obtrusive. Susan Stringham in *The Wings of the Dove*, and Fanny Assingham in *The Golden Bowl*, are too vocal. On the other hand, Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors* helps to mark the superiority of this novel by being worked into the fabric of the action so well that it is no longer possible to dismiss her as belonging to the manner and not the matter of the novel, according to James's own definition of the *ficelle*.⁷

The style of the late novels, however mannered, is at its best rich in meaning and highly evocative. It is constantly made