The Question of Henry James

Various Opinions . . . Edited by

F. W. DUPEE

MAX BEERBOHM R. P. BLACKMUR T. S. ELIOT W. H. AUDEN
VAN WYCK BROOKS F. O. MATTHIESSEN JOSEPH CONRAD
EDMUND WILSON FORD MADOX FORD STEPHEN SPENDER
ANDRÉ GIDE WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS PERCY LUBBOCK

The Question of
HENRY JAMES

A COLLECTION

OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

EDITED BY

F. W. DUPEE

NEW YORK: HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

Introduction

ALTHOUGH Henry James died in 1916, the worth of his art is still in question, and the question can still cause high temperatures among his critics. On hearing that the present volume was being planned, a well-known American novelist wrote the editor: "Now more than ever I believe that the H. J. boom is the gravest thing that has happened to our U.S. culture in our time." On the other hand a respected periodical lately devoted an entire issue to appreciative studies of James's work—it was the fourth such symposium on him since his death. Obviously Henry James is not an author whom it is easy to take or leave.

So from the 1860's to the present, numerous writers—poets and novelists as well as professional critics—have needed to say their say about him. In trying to say it, moreover, they have felt obliged to explore a variety of critical approaches—textual, historical, psychological, metaphysical, etc.—and a variety of manners ranging from solemnity to parody. Even readers who will not allow much virtue to James himself will have to admit he was the cause it was abundantly present in his critics. Some of the essays in this volume illustrate various aspects of the Jamesian controversy; others simply aim at expounding his work from a position outside the battle. They are all, it is hoped, significant examples of modern criticism faced with a peculiarly intricate and engrossing subject.

The question of Henry James brings into play acute convictions on very lively subjects and is therefore of greater density and wider consequence than most readers may believe. This introduction will try to expose briefly some of the more frequent causes of disagreement; but since the causes are in James as well as in his critics, the introduction will have to approach

James with certain assumptions of its own. And, although the question is really all one, it will have to be broken down into more or less distinct items. The danger is that James, whose genius is problematical largely for the very reason that it is such a living tissue of contradictions, will emerge from this treatment resembling an efficient department store.

First of all, then, there is an aesthetic question. An "advanced" writer, at any rate in his later work, James shares some of the attitudes behind that kind of writing and stirs up some of the familiar arguments as to its merits. Like Joyce, Yeats, Eliot, and others, he seems to have believed that the traditional rights of the creative imagination were infringed upon by the empirical spirit of our scientific culture. And like them, too, James appropriated to the imagination, conceived in its classical role as the organizer and intensifier of life, those features of empiricism which stress the importance of concrete experience and the value of method. He thoroughly respected the power of nineteenth-century fiction to register "the life of the times" in well-documented writing. To him, however, documentation meant not the assembling of masses of data but the intensive scrutiny and careful deployment of a few. A kind of visionary of the small fact, he compels a maximum of meaning from a minimum of evidence. And in proportion as he stylizes the materials of experience, he elaborates the form of his work. In a James novel the style, the dialogue, the imagery, the symbolism, the various narrative devices, all constitute high pressures under which, to the extent that he is successful, the minutiae of life and sensibility are transformed into great witnesses. Above all, perhaps, his work is a triumph of the word—to the extent, again, that it is a triumph at all. Although he brings us many of the regular delights of fiction, such as humor, notable characters, and keen psychological observations, it is probably just to remark that his imagination asserts itself primarily through a profound analytical sense of language and an exceptional power to employ it dramatically.

It is at this point that the disagreements begin. By some readers the novels are declared insubstantial, deficient in life, and therefore devoid of the usual satisfactions of novels. Some-

times James is charged with sacrificing substance to an undue concern for the niceties of form; again it is said that he simply knew too little of the world to be able to invent anything but shadowy characters entangled in farfetched situations. The most famous attack on James from this point of view is probably the passage in H. G. Wells's *Boon, the Mind of the Race,* which compares the James novel to a church, brilliantly lighted but quite empty of people, every line of which leads to the high altar whereon "very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a piece of string." Wells's epigram summed up the objections to James of a whole generation of realists, British and American. It continues to reverberate.

But among Wells's contemporaries were other writers—Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Percy Lubbock—whose appreciation of James's art was profound. For them his researches in form were an integral feature of his genius; and they did not hesitate, if they were novelists, to take over certain of his innovations; or if they were critics, to adopt his theories as their own. The whole period in England was one of experiment in novel writing; and James's literary principles, as embodied in his novels and stories and explained in the prefaces to the New York Edition of his work, helped to stimulate some very good books on the poetics of the novel and inspired even in those who disagreed an attention which at that time they seldom received in America.

Until recently, and with some notable exceptions, American critics have been rather incurious as to James's art, preferring to investigate his relation to his native country. That relation makes up another large item in the Jamesian controversy, for reasons that have to do with the complexion of American thought on American writing. Usually a revolutionary country in its literary image of itself, the United States has been slow to embrace any multitradition system in literature to match the admirable multiparty arrangement that prevails in its political life. Those who accept, say, Mark Twain and Walt Whitman as types of the American writer are apt to disparage or even read out of the national literature writers whose sense of America is more complex—for example, T. S. Eliot and Henry James. In James's case the excommunication was actually attempted,

and not by some insignificant fanatic but by Vernon Louis Parrington. And although Van Wyck Brooks allows James great importance, it is the symbolic importance of an American who left his country and so failed as an artist. In America, therefore, James criticism often veils a dispute between those who want to keep our literary image comparatively simple, comparatively faithful to our democratic professions, and those who believe it is improved by the sort of complication that comes from recognizing in our society as it exists deep contradictions and broad areas of faulty practice.

In the criticism of James considered as an American, one important strain is occupied with the causes and effects of his residence in Europe. The question here is whether his expatriation cut him off from certain vital influences and so deformed his mind and work; or whether, by placing him among circumstances more favorable to his temperament, it helped him to become a great international artist. But there are many critics for whom James's Americanism is a question not of the conditions of his life but of the character of his work as its stands. The serious critics who find the work completely foreign to American traditions are very few. For most of them, from his contemporary W. D. Howells on, the study of James is a family drama culminating in a recognition scene wherein the supposed stranger reveals himself as the lost Orestes or the prodigal son. In other words, the aristocratic and worldly James turns out to be a continuator of the severe ethics of New England. The temptations of Europe have only exaggerated his inherited passion for fine scruples and heroic renunciations. In the name of American righteousness, his candid heroines even think to conquer the world.

In *The American Scene* James spoke of "the great adventure of a society reaching out into the apparent void for the amenities, the consummations, after having earnestly gathered in so many of the preparations and necessities." The society was that of the United States at the time of what James believed to be its emergence from a relatively crude pioneering stage into a stage where leisure, enjoyment, and reflection might become more immediate realities. Philip Rahv, one of the most original of

Introduction

James's recent critics, has suggested that the whole Jamesian question can be better understood if we see him as the artist of that "great adventure," at once the exponent and the expression of America's cultural aspirations, with all the hope and doubt, the alternating arrogance and humility, that attended them. For James "culture" is certainly a complex and problematical value, as it is in those ancient myths where culture is experience, experience is knowledge, and knowledge is loss of innocence. In his novels the innocent people, who are usually Americans, are confronted with the possibilities for good and evil in a life of superior cultivation and worldly enjoyment; while the worldly people, who are usually Europeans or Europeanized Americans, are acted upon, changed, sometimes even destroyed, by the singular power of innocence. James's sense of the equivocal nature of culture, his tendency to identify it with something at once inviting and menacing, is illustrated by the divisions of *The Portrait of a Lady:* in the first half the American heroine's European visit is an agreeable experience full of lessons in taste and manners; in the second half she becomes so embroiled in the evils of Europe that her journey there has become a trip to Hell. And so thoroughly did the drama of conscience and culture, innocence and experience, possess James's imagination that it continued to be latent in certain of his novels where the settings and the characters were entirely non-American.

Compared with the epic subjects to which, it is sometimes assumed, James might have helped himself in the new and challenging America of his day, this theme has sometimes been declared trivial in itself. It has proved easy for some of James's readers to overlook the multiple implications culture had for him and so to assume he was simply a pedant and a snob. In the main, however, it was his management of the theme that proved most controversial. In his famous creation, the international novel, he involved Europe and America, Europeans and Americans, in an elaborate pattern of moral and cultural antinomies, a myth of his own making. No matter how delicately it was conceived or how conscientiously it was varied from novel to novel, the pattern could not but bring into play the national loyalties of readers, as well as their sense of historical fact. He

often portrayed Americans as innocent in the unfavorable as well as the favorable sense, assuming on their part an ignorance of the world and a deprivation of essential experience which were counter to their prevailing assumptions about themselves. And from the European point of view James could be suspected of a certain ethical chauvinism which consisted in allowing Europe glamor but denying her the higher conscience.

Yet there have always been readers for whom James's international fables required no apology. If their treatment of history was sometimes arbitrary, that was altogether justified by their wealth of finely observed detail; by their essential insight into national characteristics; by the way they ministered to the excitement we feel, in an age of exasperated nationalism, at contemplating nuances in the texture of life from country to country; by the very transatlantic scope of their vision, unique in the history of the novel. And then, the more deeply the novels are studied the more they are seen to secrete ironies within ironies, in respect to nationalities as well as to everything else. For example, two recent students of *The Golden Bowl,* Louise Bogan and Ferner Nuhn, arrive at such different conclusions as to the relative merits of the Europeans and the Americans in this novel, that one wonders if they have consulted the same text. To Nuhn the book is proof of Van Wyck Brooks's old contention that for James Europe remained "a fairy tale to the end"; to Miss Bogan it is a work of "stern, prodigious human facts" concerning not only Europeans and Americans, but also personality in general. It is possible that we have still not come to the core of James's meaning; and that time, in addition to revealing much else about him, will show his international theme to have the same value—no more and no less—that Italian politics have in the total vision of Dante.

But what kind of prophet of experience does James make, finicking as he admittedly was about sex? Needless to say, this particular Jamesian question seems not to have troubled his older contemporaries, for whom he was daring enough for any good purpose. But owing to the changed sexual values of recent years, James's reticence is often declared to be at odds, not only with the easy naturalism of the average novel, but also with his

own frequent commands to "Live, live." Stephen Spender and Edmund Wilson are among the critics who have written at length on this subject; and Spender, for all his admiration, even charges James with a peculiar sexual vulgarity. "In the early novels and stories, with the exception of *The Princess Casamassima,* wherever James approaches the physical side of life he seems to draw on his gloves, and his nouns draw on their inverted commas. When his subject is sex, he sheers away from it by reducing it to a formality, and if one tries to imagine his characters physically, one feels that one is lifting a veil which conceals something repulsive. Here the vulgarity lies in the tastelessness of what is artificial when a comparison is forced with what is natural." What Spender is deploring in James is not of course the absence of an ardent—Freudian naturalism like his own—for such an expectation would be counter to the whole ethical tendency of James's mind—but a failure to dramatize passion in such a way that when his characters renounce it they strike us as renouncing something real. But Spender goes on to say that in the later books the sexual inhibition works itself out in half-conscious fantasies and images of violence, which are very beautiful and meaningful if interpreted on the plane of symbolism. In all this Spender is following the lead of Edmund Wilson and Edna Kenton in their Freudian studies of the novels, particularly *The Turn of the Screw.*

In regard to social questions, insofar as these are distinct from what has already been discussed, James is again full of difficulties for his readers. From a democratic standpoint, what are we to think of novels in which, as it is generally agreed, the rich and the wellborn are the center of interest while the poor and declassed exist solely in relation to them—on the whole, a not very flattering relation of acute curiosity, conscientious dependency, or active yearning? For in James wealth seems to be a definite value, though shot through with possible evils, while poverty and labor (the labors of the artist excepted) are frankly limbos of dreariness. On this evidence many critics have deplored the novels as snobbishly false. But there has been another strain in criticism—it is rather recent—which has found him worthy of

highly sympathetic analysis in the light of modern political theory. And strangely enough, James the supposed aristocrat owes to socialist and near-socialist critics like Edmund Wilson, Robert Cantwell, Stephen Spender, Newton Arvin, and F. O. Matthiessen some of the most careful and appreciative comment he has ever received. Again it is a question of whether we take him literally or symbolically, as an exponent or as a witness. Like other modern critics, they discourage any reading of James that takes a part of his effect for the whole. Their interpretation allows for the presence in his work, at least intermittently, of a realistic social insight; an insight which, because it came to him by virtue not of theory but of patient and anxious observation, is never simply assumed or stated in his work but is revealed through the most reticent suggestions and involved ironies. According to this view, then, James's fascination with a baronial state of society was a very condition of his literary existence. To it he owed whatever was tiresome or objectionable in his limited range and occasional heavy fumbling after social truths which are obvious to others; but it also contributed to that characteristic irony, that effect of a world of confused splendor and terror, of a bright jungle concealing a dim beast, which those who admire him find so exciting and prophetic in his work. In other words, he could so warmly reject the principle of acquisition because he had so passionately suffered its temptations; and indeed he is simply a special instance of that Machiavellian strain without which the novel of modern society would lack experiential power and so be a mere sermon.

F. W. DUPEE

Acknowledgments

IN GENERAL the essays in this book are printed in chronological order. That arrangement has been abandoned in a few instances where a more interesting order suggested itself. So F. O. Matthiessen's essay on *The Ambassadors* (1944) is paired with Stephen Spender's on *The Golden Bowl* (1936) as a kindred example of the close study of single important novels. And Philip Rahv's "Attitudes Toward Henry James" (1943) is put last because, as a summary of the James question, it seemed to belong there. A number of well-known pieces had to be left out either because they were too long or because, as in the case of H. G. Wells's satire in *Boon: The Mind of the Race, The Wild Asses of the Devil, and The Last Trump,* the author's permission to reprint could not be obtained. With the exception of Conrad's essay, the contributions are unabridged, although, in a few cases, the authors have made minor alterations in their texts.

The chapter on *The Golden Bowl* from *The Destructive Element* by Stephen Spender is reprinted by permission of the publishers, Jonathan Cape Limited, London. It was published in the United States by Houghton Mifflin Company. "In Darkest James" from *Imaginary Obligations* by Frank Moore Colby is reprinted by permission of Dodd, Mead and Co., Inc. The editor has supplied the title "Historian of Fine Consciences" for the excerpt from *Notes on Life and Letters* by Joseph Conrad, Copyright 1921, by Doubleday, Doran and Co., Inc., and the title "Two Phases of Henry James" for the excerpt from *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* by Van Wyck Brooks, published and copyright 1925, by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York. "The Mote in the Middle Distance" is reprinted from *A Christmas Garland* by Max Beerbohm, published by E. P. Dutton & Co.,

Inc., New York. "Henry James and the Nostalgia of Culture" is reprinted from *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America (1860-1920)* by Vernon L. Parrington, Copyright 1930, by Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc. "The American" is a chapter from *American Humor* by Constance Rourke, Copyright 1931, by Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc. "The Ambiguity of Henry James" is reprinted from *The Triple Thinkers* by Edmund Wilson, Copyright 1938, by Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc. "The Aesthetic Idealism of Henry James" is from *Contemporary Literature* by Stuart Sherman, Copyright 1917, by Henry Holt and Company. The editor has given the title "Henry James and Stephen Crane" to the short section from *Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters* by Thomas Beer, which is reprinted by permission of and special arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Copyright 1923, by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and the title "The Old Man" to the excerpt from *Return to Yesterday* by Ford Madox Ford, which is reprinted by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation. "The Ambassadors" is reprinted from *Henry James: The Major Phase* by F. O. Matthiessen by permission of Oxford University Press, New York. "At the Grave of Henry James" is from *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* and is reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc. Percy Lubbock's Introduction to *The Letters of Henry James* is reprinted by permission of the publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons. "The Figure in the Carpet," a chapter from *The Method of Henry James* by Joseph Warren Beach, is reprinted by permission of the publishers, Yale University Press. "Henry James, Jr." is from *Short Studies of American Authors* by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, published in 1880 by Ticknor and Fields.

"Henry James in the World" by Edna Kenton appeared in the April-May 1934 issue of the *Hound & Horn,* and is reprinted by permission of the publishers. "Attitudes Toward Henry James" by Philip Rahv and "The Altar of Henry James" by William Troy both appeared in the February 15, 1943, issue of the *New Republic,* and are reprinted by permission of the publishers. "Henry James and His Countrymen" by Herbert Croly appeared in the February 1904 issue of *Lamp,* and is reprinted

by permission of Mrs. Louise Mary Croly. "Mr. Henry James's Later Work" by William Dean Howells appeared in the January 1903 issue of the *North American Review.*

The editor wishes to thank the following authors who have given him permission to reprint their articles: Jacques Barzun, for "Henry James, Melodramatist," and R. P. Blackmur, for "In the Country of the Blue," both of which appeared in the Autumn 1943 issue of the *Kenyon Review;* T. S. Eliot, whose essay on Henry James appeared in the August 1918 issue of the *Little Review;* André Gide, for "Henry James," which appeared in the March 1930 issue of the *Yale Review;* and Morton D. Zabel, for "The Poetics of Henry James," which was written not as an essay but as a book review for the February 1935 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse.*

The quotation from *The Art of the Novel* by R. P. Blackmur is reprinted by permission of the publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons. The quotations from *New England: Indian Summer* and *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* by Van Wyck Brooks are reprinted by permission of E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publishers for permission to use the quotations from the works of Henry James which appear within the articles in this collection: Harper and Brothers, for the quotations from *The Ambassadors, The American Scene, The Death of the Lion,* and *An International Episode;* Houghton Mifflin Company, for the quotations from *The American, London Notes, The Portrait of a Lady, Roderick Hudson, The Spoils of Poynton,* and *The Tragic Muse;* The Macmillan Company, Inc., for the quotations from *The Lesson of the Master,* from "The Next Time" and "The Figure in the Carpet" in *Embarrassments,* and from "The Turn of the Screw" in *Two Magics;* Charles Scribner's Sons, for the quotations from *The Altar of the Dead, The Golden Bowl, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Sacred Fount, The Wings of the Dove,* from the essays on D'Annunzio and George Sand in *Notes on Novelists,* and from "The Jolly Corner" and "The Private Life" in *Novels and Tales.*

Biographical Note

HENRY JAMES was born April 15, 1843, at 2 Washington Place, New York City. He was the son of Henry James, religious philosopher, and the brother of William James, the psychologist and philosopher of pragmatism. Much of James's youth was spent in Europe, where he traveled with his family and attended various schools. After a brief residence in Newport, R. I., he attended Harvard Law School from 1862 to 1864. In the later sixties he began to publish reviews and stories. His first novel, *Watch and Ward,* appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1871. In 1875 he went to live in Europe, first in Paris, then in England, where, except for three trips to the United States and frequent tours on the continent, he remained all his life. *Roderick Hudson* appeared in 1876, *The American* in 1877, *Daisy Miller* in 1879, and *The Portrait of a Lady,* his most important novel so far, in 1881. In 1882 his father died and he returned briefly to the United States. *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* were published in 1886, *The Tragic Muse* in 1890. For the next five years he tried, not very successfully, to write for the English theater. *Terminations,* containing important short stories, appeared in 1896. In 1897 he moved from London to Lamb House, Rye, Sussex. *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew* were published in 1897, *The Turn of the Screw* in 1898, *The Awkward Age* in 1899, *The Sacred Fount* in 1901, *The Wings of the Dove* in 1902, *The Better Sort* (short stories), *The Ambassadors* in 1903, and *The Golden Bowl* in 1904. In 1904-05 he visited America and toured the country, gathering material for *The American Scene,* a book of impressions, which appeared in 1907. In the same year there appeared the first volumes of the New York Edition of his work, a selection of his novels and stories, together with prefaces explaining

his principles as an artist. In 1910 his brother William died and he paid his last visit to the United States. That same year he published a book of short narratives, *The Finer Grain.* In 1913 he published *A Small Boy and Others,* and in the following year *Notes of a Son and Brother,* both volumes of memoirs. In 1915, during the World War, he became a naturalized British subject. On February 28, 1916, after repeated illnesses, he died in London. Two important posthumous novels, *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past,* both fragments, appeared in 1917.

Contents

Contents