THE SHORT STORIES OF HENRY JAMES

THE

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OF

HENRY JAMES

SELECTED & EDITED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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INTRODUCTION

1. *VITA BREVIS*

IN A CERTAIN sense nothing happened to Henry James, or rather, the things that happened to him were negative things. The first large event in his life (after his birth in New York City on April 15, 1843) was an accident to his back that prevented him from becoming a soldier in the Civil War (see A Note on "The Jolly Corner," page 641). He never married. He seems to have had no passionate relations with women or with men. He never had to earn his own living. He lived to be seventy-three, suffering only the normal illnesses that come to most mortals.

In his long life there is but a scattered handful of "dates." In 1875 he removed to Europe, and during the next year chose England for his lifelong residence. In 1897 he forsook London for a small house in Rye in Sussex. In 1904-1905 he spent ten months revisiting his native land. With the beginning of the First German War Against Mankind came a sudden outburst of emotion, formally symbolized by his becoming in 1915 a naturalized British subject. On February 28, 1916, he died.

Hardly an active life, one might superficially judge; yet, as one studies its concretion—that is to say, his books—one begins to wonder whether it was not one of the most active lives of the entire century, though it went on almost entirely in his head. The word for James—it is his favorite—is awareness. He must have been aware of more impressions and reflected upon more ideas in the course of a single waking hour than is the lot of you or me in the course of a year or, in more cases, a lifetime. Nothing happened to him except everything, everything that he could observe, relate, weigh, judge. These discriminations produced an incalculable amount of life, an entire population of human beings, a world of connections. And they were continually subjected to control, to a proper and

harmonious ordering. Experience assumes meaning when the proper form for its expression is found—and only then. Thus the life of Henry James became identical with the search for and the discovery of the proper form. It became a work of art. This work of art was a growth, like the life of Goethe, minus the pomposity. James began as a mediocre imitator of Hawthorne, as a bright young reviewer, as a purveyor of genteel chit-chat. He ended as a great creative novelist and critic. The progression was not accidental. It was the result of constant self-examination, self-knowledge, self-control—and plain hard work. This is not to deny that the spring of it all—his genius—was in him from birth. It is merely to suggest that, more than any other writer of his time, he converted the potentialities of that genius into the fullest possible actuality.

From the point of view of the typical hero of our time, the success-monger, James hardly lived at all. From another point of view, he lived a life so full, so passionate, so aware, that in comparison the careers of the success-men seem anemic and withered.

The "life" of Henry James need never be written by anyone, for he wrote it himself in fifty remarkable volumes and half a dozen supreme ones.

2. *ARS LONGA*

Daisy Miller (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880) stand, amid James's varied and copious works, as the two titles that earned him, during his long lifetime, something like popular acclaim. *The Turn of the Screw* has occasionally been reprinted as a thriller. A few of the short stories and one or two of the longer ones (*The Aspern Papers,* for example) have crept into the anthologies. To the eye of the modern public and the modern publisher, however, he was an unsuccessful novelist. Not only did he not sell; he was not even talked about. Whatever

reputation he possessed receded after his death in 1916, though there have been small waves of reawakened interest, the latest during the last few years. With Mark Twain and Melville, he is one of our three greatest novelists, but there is no collected edition of him readily available, and most of his masterpieces are unobtainable.

The case against James is firmly rooted and, to be fair about it, has a certain cogency. Suppose we try to summarize it and then see whether it stands up. It rests on five main points.

1. *He, and hence his work, is rootless.* His alienation from America is exposed in his work and was formally symbolized by his becoming, in 1915, a British subject. He ignored completely the great theme of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the rise of industrial America. His art is enfeebled by the malnutrition resulting from this split in his allegiance.

2. *His snobbery imposed on him a pathetically limited subject matter.* His mature life was spent among the rich, the well-born, the eminent—or among artists. He had little sympathy for the common man, viewed with apathy the democratic drift of his time, and (except for his literary friendships) attached himself to all that was decadent and artificial in European, British and expatriate-American society. His characters, being drawn from this small and dwindling class, lack warmth, breadth and social gravity. The *beau monde* he knew, but not the big world.

3. *Even within this world his emotional range is narrow.* His early injury may have been the reason for his never marrying. In any case his work shows little realistic expression of passion. It is bare of any representation of violence or of the larger, cruder, more elemental emotions. It is timid, even old-maidish. It lacks masculinity.

4. *He sacrificed content to form.* His elaborate esthetic theories stifled the free flow of his imagination. His interest in "effects," in the mere architecture of narrative, made him draw out his stories to excessive length. He disguised the poverty of his content with the artifice of formal tricks and mannerisms.

5. *His style is esoteric to the point of unreadability.* His dislike of banality swelled, in his later phase, into a mania, the consequence of which was a prose so dense, involved, indirect, and allusive as to amount virtually to a dead language.

Thus, at its most vigorous, the arraignment of Henry James. Those who draw it up do not necessarily deny him genius, but they consider the genius so specialized and rarefied as to be insulated from the general reader. I have tried to be fair in my presentation of their case, all the more because, not many years ago, the shallowness of my own knowledge of Henry James would have placed me more or less in their camp.

I have tried to be fair, also, because the case is not without merit. It is based on what seem to be salient facts. James *was* a man without a country. His characters *are* drawn largely from the rich, the idle, the over-sensitive, often the frivolous. Man as a sexual animal is *not* one of his specialties. He *has* a hypertrophied interest in the problem of literary form. His later style *is* difficult. All this is true. Yet, during the past ten years or so, it has become apparent, at first to a small group of literary critics and scholars, then to an increasingly wider circle of perceptive readers, that it is not the whole truth. Somehow or other, after the charge has been drawn up and its points admitted, Henry James continues to impose himself. There is something in him, large, pervasive and valuable, that eludes the indictment.

James's importance, its quality and extent, may take us some years to assess. We may not even be able to see it clearly, because our attitude toward him is in a sense impure. Perhaps we are getting solace from him, perhaps we are using him as a balm rather than a great writer.

For example, those who care passionately for our English speech find in the precision, the exquisiteness, the close workmanship of James's prose a relief from the careless, uncleanly, and hyperthyroid jargon which currently passes muster for sound writing. James's almost fussy concern for elevated, even

noble standards of craftsmanship operates in agreeable contrast to our own fetish of relaxation, our cult of "informality" (a sweet name for mental laziness). Ours is a period in which books are made easy for us to read; in which, if this reading is too hard for us, we are given pictures accompanied by nursery-prose captions; in which, if pictures are too difficult, we are furnished with comic-strips. Years ago James saw all this coming. Indeed he described with stunning accuracy the triumph of our most admired journalism when he spoke of "the bastard vernacular of communities disinherited of the felt difference between the speech of the soil and the speech of the newspaper, and capable thereby, accordingly, of taking slang for simplicity, the composite for the quaint and the vulgar for the natural." To Howells he wrote, "The *faculty of attention* has utterly vanished from the general Anglo-Saxon mind, extinguished at its source by the big, blatant Bayadère of Journalism." Those who find themselves unable to agree that the communication of ideas and feelings must necessarily be on a pre-adolescent level find in the careful complexities of Henry James a welcome challenge.

In our day form and subtlety in the novel are not expected; they are even decried. To those in reaction against the current passion for looseness of pattern and flatness of speech, James offers form and subtlety in heaping measure. Furthermore, at a time when no demands are made for the close, analytic appreciation of literature, James's uncompromising severity of approach, his perfect confidence that literature is a noble thing, worthy of the most unrelaxed attention, has a certain tonic value. It is possibly true, as Spengler declared, that ours is an age of the conqueror and the technician, an age in which the artist (unless he is "successful") will tend increasingly to be contemned. Those unable to accept the conqueror and the technician as paragons of human experience find in James's fervent—even feverish—defense of the creative life a measure of consolation.

Finally, it may be that James's seeming unconcern with social

and community problems, his unrelenting preoccupation with the individual (although always with the society-conditioned individual) comes as a welcome counterbalance to our own absorption in the State-man, the Group-man, rather than the individual man.

Yet these are hardly sound reasons for praising James. Are we merely inclining to him because he offers something absent in our own environment, because he soothes some contemporary irritation?

Yes; but I would suggest that the return to Henry James is based also on something deeper, much harder to define. It is based on our sense that here is an author who is subtler than he seems, that there is hardly any end to his complexity, that underneath the surface vein are riches still to be mined. He is a writer with whom one does not easily finish. He exerts the fascination of those devious spirits whose message is neither slight nor immediate. As an artist he is, of course, inferior to such men as Melville or Dante, but he is one with them in that he may be approached on more than a single level of perception. Reread and studied (for, I submit, he must be studied, he asks that we pay *attention* to him) he almost eerily reveals another James lying beneath the James of the familiar indictment.

All at once we perceive that his "rootlessness" furnishes him with an international viewpoint and, indeed, an international style, both far more relevant to our own time than they were to James's period. If Europe was once part of the American fate, America is now part of the European fate. Hence it has come about that those writers who can mediate between the two continents hold for us an enhanced value; and of these James is far and away the most meaningful. Indeed, he is more than a mediator. He is the herald of a time when mediation will no longer be necessary, when mankind will in truth be one. Dimly he perceived the remote future when he spoke of "the multiplied symptoms among educated people, from wherever drawn,

of a common intelligence and a social fusion tending to abridge old rigours of separation. . . . There, if one will—in the dauntless fusions to come—is the personal drama of the future."

As for his "snobbery," we note that while on occasion it can be irritating, it more often only half conceals the most thorough, the slyest, the most pitiless of satire on the leisure class. Read *The Princess Casamassima* for proof; or in this volume study the unpretentious story, "Mrs. Medwin." James was occasionally taken in by the leisure class, but not permanently and not deeply. His unfinished novel, *The Ivory Tower,* is a work of social criticism as much as is *An American Tragedy;* indeed, it shows the reverse side of that tragedy.

Seen in the light of what Freud has taught us, James suddenly demonstrates an extraordinary perception of the hidden and even sinister drives of men and women. I think it at least arguable that the distant manner in which he handles sex comes about not through ignorance or timidity but because, like the other Anglo-Saxon novelists of his time, he was forced by the taboos of his culture into reticence or ambiguity. That he does not, except rarely, represent passion directly, is true; but that he understood it and is compelled to express his understanding obliquely is, I believe, demonstrable. Certainly no one will deny (*The Turn of the Screw* is the most forcible instance here) that he had an almost intuitive perception of the unconscious and the part it plays in conditioning behavior.

His absorption in formal problems presents itself as a noble literary conscientiousness, pure, ascetic, but by no means frigid or remote; and the more we study him the more we become convinced that in him, as in any great writer, form and content are one. Even the famous style is seen to be a beautiful machine for the perfect projection of James's complex and curious perceptions. It is a weapon, not a toy.

One makes the general discoveries that James is wonderfully near to us; that he is a *modern* writer, to be ranked with Joyce, Proust, Mann, and not a nineteenth-century writer at all; that

his studies of Americans in Europe in 1875 tell us a great deal about Americans in America in 1945; that from the embryonic prefigurings of his own time he foresaw many of the brutal dilemmas American acquisitive society now faces—and is thus extraordinarily valuable, though dead for almost thirty years, as a trenchant critic of the life around us; that (as *The Princess Casamassima* discloses) he knew or rather divined much about the conflict of classes; that his prefaces to his novels, his essays on Flaubert, Emerson, Stevenson, Turgenev, and others entitle him to rank as a master of literary criticism; that, in sum, while a moderate portion of his work *is* trivial tea-table chatter, the larger remainder is devoted to the most profound, ambiguous and touching of the moral experiences of man. I do not see how any unprejudiced reader can study "The Beast in the Jungle" or *The Turn of the Screw* or "The Pupil" or "The Jolly Corner" (not to mention his larger masterpieces) without sensing that James, for all his fussiness, for all the cloistered quality of his experience, had somehow reached out and obtained a firm grasp of that stick whose two ends are labeled Good and Evil. He was, in other words, a philosophical novelist, his concern being generally, though not always, with what is persistent in the heart of man.

He did not, it is true, have the range of Tolstoy or Balzac, but, within his narrower compass, he worked to a great depth. Not satisfied merely to present an understandable, easily graspable report on an individual consciousness, he would not stop, this patient, eager artist, until he had wrung that consciousness dry. When you have finished *What Maisie Knew,* for instance, you do not merely have a clear picture of Maisie. You *know* Maisie; you feel that there is nothing left in Maisie for James to tell you about; she is complete. You may not like James's characters, you may not think them "important," but it is hard to deny that they are exhaustively created. And it is from the exhaustiveness of the creation that one derives the sense that, while he at no time systematizes it, James has a wise and search-

ing view of life. In his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* he says that there is "no more nutritive or suggestive truth . . . than that of the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it." Where there is enough knowledge, there is virtue.

To James, writing is not an opportunity for self-expression, or at least not merely for self-expression. It is first a problem, not first a solution. He thought about writing as Mozart must have thought about music, as the unsurpassable nameless architects must have thought about the cathedral of Chartres. That writing must express something goes without saying, but everything, for James, lies in the manner, the method of the expression. What is to be expressed must first be grasped in all possible relations (the opposite of impressionism); then a form must be discovered to enclose all these relations in the best conceivable way, which is, of course, the most economical way. James at his finest works on the principle of least action. He may seem elaborate, but that is only because he has seen all there is to express—and the all is multifarious, puzzling, "thick," to use his word. He speaks somewhere of "exquisite economy in composition"; and again of "that odd law which somehow always makes the minimum of valid suggestion serve the man of imagination better than the maximum"; and again—most revealing of phrases—of "the baseness of the arbitrary stroke." Accident James leaves to life,which specializes in it; but art cannot come out of the fortuitous. The artist by accident is a contradiction in terms; the true creator fights all his life against the temptation to take the easy road, to write the "readable," to gain effects by happy strokes. "The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business," says James, "in face of the *constant* force that makes for muddlement." In James there is difficulty, there is complexity, but there is no muddlement. He is always clear, but only so after we have made a successful, if often an exhausting effort to perceive what it is he is being clear about.

Yeats, in his poem, "The Choice," tells us

> "The intellect of man is forced to choose
> Perfection of the life, or of the work."

When we survey the life and work of Henry James we are filled with a sense that in a manner he resolved the dilemma Yeats poses. As we have seen, not a great deal "happened" to James; but he made everything that did happen pay. Indeed, out of his very sensation of non-experience he constructed two masterpieces—"The Beast in the Jungle," which is about a man whose tragedy is that nothing ever happened to him; and *The Ambassadors,* which is about a man superbly equipped to react to the experiences which came to him too late. James put everything he saw, everything he felt, everything he thought, everything he was, into his books—but only after this everything had been subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny and organization. His work is not, in Yeats's phrase, "perfection"—no life work is—but it comes breathlessly close to it. It is singularly rounded; it increases in importance as James ages. (He is one of the few writers of whom one might say that he would have written better at 170 than he did at 70.) It touches heights in several media—the long novel, the short novel, the short story, the literary essay, the familiar essay, the personal memoir. It is the harmonious record of a life that organized itself consciously, yet without pedantry, almost from its beginnings. And, because its creator rejected the shoddy, the easy, the second-best, because he was always hard on himself, because nothing but the essence, the economized, the beaten gold leaf was good enough for him, what he contrived speaks to us still, and will, in the years to come, still speak.

3. *A WORD ABOUT THIS BOOK*

James wrote about eighty short stories—let's use the term for anything under 20,000 words, and we'll avoid a good many arguments. This is an extraordinary number and would have sufficed to establish James as a prolific writer had he written nothing else. He had a high conception of the function of the short story and, though his output contains many failures, it contains no potboilers. Over-elaboration lies at the root of some of the failures. In other cases the material is too slight, too special, or, let us admit, too strongly marked with the date of its composition.

The seventeen stories I have chosen for this collection do not seem to me slight (except in one or two cases), special, or dated. Particularly do they not seem to me dated. The specific preservative of style works strongly in them, and no less strongly the general preservative which is nothing less than the clear expression of the truth about human nature. The earliest of these stories bears the date of 1877, the latest that of 1909; but the words in them are instant, not remote. Part of that instancy springs from James's refusal to admit background as particularly important in depicting the relations among people. He can do a background as well as any "realistic" novelist, but he recognizes the job for the minor thing it is. Those who do not care for James argue, often quite persuasively, that he depicts manners; and that, because manners change, he will not last. It is true that he often does depict manners, even mannerisms; but they are rarely mere topical documentation; and in his finer stories—such as the ones here included—they occupy a subordinate position.

I hope that this modest collection will lead many readers to the major works; but, even if it does not, those readers, if they are adequately attentive, will have obtained a considerable view

of James's mind and method. The stories have been selected in such a way as to profile James's development and bring out in relief the themes that absorbed his creative imagination over a period of more than a quarter of a century. The reader will note a progression from the relatively simple to the supremely complex, from the casual to the concentrated, from the merely serious to the grandly tragic. Yet, though "Four Meetings" is a small thing and "The Beast in the Jungle" a great one, the second is implicit in the first. James is a perfectly ordered, unified personality. He wrote nothing eccentric to himself. Like every human being, and particularly every writer, he occasionally lost confidence in himself; but he never really lost himself, Henry James, the man underlying the confidence or lack of confidence. The perfect recognition of the powers of his own personality is the mark of the master of any art.

As for the editor's notes, if you care to read them at all, please read each one directly *after* you have finished the corresponding story. They are intended to serve two modest purposes: first, to indicate, however crudely, the manner in which James tends to stimulate reflection; second, taken as a unit, to suggest a rough idea of the development of James as a worker in the restricted field of the short story. If, beyond this, they interest you in James generally and send some readers on to his greater and more difficult works, I shall consider my pleasant task amply rewarded.

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