HENRY JAMES

THE AWKWARD AGE

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INTRODUCTION

Disappointment can harass the confidence necessary for creation but it can also do the reverse and act as a stimulant. For it to revitalize and not crush there has to be a swift abandonment of what brought it about, a candid recognition of having thrust along the wrong path. It was not hubris or even experiment which led Henry James to stray from fiction to plays during the early nineties. Far less sensitive ears than his had detected the shift of social comment from the story to the stage, and for him at that moment it seemed no more than a natural progression that his dialogue should advance from being read to being spoken. All he was certain of, and this only in his kind, humble way, was that his art was singularly capable of picking up the nuances of a darkly altering scene. The wits and the moralists, Wilde, Ibsen and others, saw the old veneer cracking and were far from tentative in their exposure of what lay beneath it. James, the recognized master of surfaces and what they concealed, believed that he had a role among the playwrights who were transforming the turgid Victorian theatre. It was an error and it took him five years and four unproduced comedies, plus the disaster of *Guy Domville*, to recognize it as such. When he did there was elation rather than despair – 'It has been a great relief to feel that one of the most detestable incidents in my life has closed.' He was injured and bewildered as people are when they have, very roughly in his case, been forced to recognize that they have laid claim to what can never be theirs, then healed and renewed. There was pain but no sense of waste. If the novel could not extend itself via the theatre, then the conditions of the play would be employed to carry the talk in fiction to hitherto unsuspected depths. The novel was his unchallengeable ground and no one would dispute his right to strike fresh routes through it.

For all the quickness of recovery, it took Henry James a fair while to fully come to terms with his 1890–95 years of hurt and failure, and label them as his 'strange sacred time', as he realized that without all the true creativity which had gone into them and ensured the magnitude of his defeat, there would have been little development in his writing. The experience had virtually hounded him into another 'originality', and at

fifty-two, when he was so elaborately set in his old ways! He was ageing, the century was ageing, and yet he was beginning! The latent possibilities of his new play-inspired style made him visionary and alert. He changed all his ways. The countryside instead of Kensington, a typist taking down his spoken words instead of the silence of his pen, bicycle rides instead of pavement walks, provincial values and entertainments instead of sophistication. He had retired in order to start again. Rye would provide his perspective for what was occurring in London, Lamb House might well be seen as his retreat by his friends but to him it would be his observatory. Society had reached one of its moments of flux and corruption, and because of what the stage had taught him he would be able to devise a means by which his readers would have to participate in his tale of it if they wanted to know what was happening.

Such a way of writing fiction was all right for Gyp, he said in his Preface to *The Awkward Age*, but far from all right for a novelist with his reputation. Gyp was the *nom-de-plume* of Marie-Antoinette de Riquetti de Mirabeau, comtesse de Martel de Janville, a delightful satirical entertainer who wrote almost entirely in dialogue highly readable pieces such as *Mademoiselle Loulou* and *Le Mariage de Chiffon*, and who struck James 'as mistress, in her levity, of one of the happiest of forms'. But, as the sales of *The Awkward Age* proved, it was not a happy form for Anglo-Saxons who might consume it when it came in the shape of speeches across the footlights, but who would 'flagrantly reject it when served, so to speak, *au naturel*'. So accustomed to densely descriptive pages was the novel-reading public that 'an English, an American Gyp would typographically offend, and that would be the end of her'. The publishers, it was true, had always clamoured for plenty of dialogue of a sort, but they found 'dialogue organic and dramatic, speaking for itself, representing and embodying substance and form . . . an uncanny and abhorrent thing . . .' Long-running plays made few people want to *read* what was being declaimed. Perhaps, James thought, he should have allowed the Gyp influence to show. While not pretending that she had no influence, he had kept the fact rather hidden. But although he read her light sketches with enjoyment she was too like the author of the French novel which Lord Petherton and Little Aggie romp over in Tishy Grendon's tainted house for his readers to think of her in the same breath as himself. Great writers can surprise their admirers by their occasional respect for what the latter would call trash.

The concept of a play-novel began to spin in his imagination even before it became necessary to find a project sufficiently engrossing to obliterate the first-night jeers of *Guy Domville*. But so much had happened to him during this bewildering last decade of the century that he

knew he would have to prepare himself like a writer at the start of his career before he could carry it through. It was not the time to bravely 'go on', it was the moment to begin anew. Mortality was everywhere. The theatre venture had run parallel with his young sister's long illness and death. Alice James had arrived from Massachusetts in 1884 (when he was writing *The Bostonians*) and had died from cancer of the breast ten years later. Unknown to Henry she kept a diary which, when they later received copies, shocked her brothers. Henry destroyed his, William made no mention of having ever received it. It was courageous about death and caustic about the British. Alice and Henry were devoted and close to each other during these London–Leamington years, and she – and after her death the diary – caused him to reflect on her fate, not as a middle-aged spinster, but as a young woman in a well-to-do family. '. . . in our family group girls seem scarcely to have had a chance . . . tragic health was, in a manner, the only solution for her of the practical problem of life.' He had written in his notebook, 'Youth, the most beautiful word in the language.' But what happened in youth? If one was a girl either nothing, or the ritual disposal of her purity to a husband.

Turning back the clock for himself, about to try his hand as 'another' writer, James began to look at human thresholds. Girls are growing up in his 1896–9 tales and are knowing. Maisie in *What Maisie Knew* is an aware child who is too young for her brilliant inner life to be darkened by what she knows about the adults who surround her. Leon Edel recognizes Maisie as the little Henry James, precocious, endangered, yet whose innocence is made safe by art. After *Maisie* comes *The Turn of the Screw* with Flora and Miles (a dead, seventeen-year-old Miles is briefly recollected by his brother in *The Awkward Age*). Whether they are polluted or not has long been a matter of necessary speculation. His 'little book' is how James described it, for unlike so many of the tales he now intended for the magazines, it hadn't galloped away with him. A story of similar length was offered to *Harper's Weekly* for $3,000, but it burst all bounds before he was a fraction of the path through it and he was obliged to tell the editor that 'I can't do the very little thing any more', and promised to try again. This intended 'very little thing' was *The Awkward Age*, and the reason why it wouldn't stay little was because he had switched from the pen to the reckless joys of dictation.

Just before leaving London for Rye his right wrist had grown painful. It was while he was working on *What Maisie Knew*. His brother William prescribed rest for the rheumatic arm and suggested that he should employ somebody to take-down his fiction. Thus, in 1897, there came the purchase which was to bring about an historic development in the English novel, Henry James's typewriter. Plus, and of equivalent import-

ance, a typist to work it. Play it, one might almost say. There was also the all-important fact that rarely again would the master be alone in a silent room during the hours of creation. From henceforth his mornings would be filled with the sounds of his own voice and the machine. The decided fatigue of long spells of pen and ink vanished, to be replaced by zest as his sentences rolled effortlessly on, or could be made to wander obliquely or fold back into parentheses. Most fascinatingly, this talking-down the tale made it possible for him to weave together the 'literary' and the vernacular with an otherwise impossible precision. Slang itself could appear as the *mot juste*. Dictation soon had a marked effect on Henry James's conversation which, from the time of *The Awkward Age* onwards, began to awe, puzzle and dazzle his friends with its circumlocutions. Not nearly enough praise has gone to that key figure of this period, his typist, a young Scot named William MacAlpine, who toiled part-time as a shorthand-reporter and part-time as the near-miraculous person capable of taking-down the master's 'late manner'. It enabled James to be 'Proustian before Proust', as Edel put it.

But while for the novelist himself it was a swift, undrudging fashion in which to work, for his now long-established readership it was a very different story. *The Awkward Age* and subsequent novels for them meant getting down to work, and not having the old easy access to a favourite author's latest delights. In today's terms there could be an analogy with a good radio play in which the listener has to fill out all kinds of spaces by his own creative processes. James's public, accustomed to receiving every written action, inflection and description, blanched at this novel minimalism and was equally loath, on the other hand, to make the effort which was necessary to 'hear' talk set down with all the complexity and beauty of spoken music. And without any proper understanding of which there was simply no book.

The Awkward Age is approached via a welcomed upheaval in Henry James's life. With London exhibiting its hollowness, he had a craving for some pretty spot where he could be sociable outside his sacred working hours but out of reach of Society itself. Strong feelings for both cities and the countryside had always run in parallel with him. Cities had their eras of pollution when it was wise to forsake them. Under so many ugly pressures – gross display of wealth, the manipulation of the conventions for every kind of self-protection or advancement, the hypocrisies released by the Wilde trial, and much else – the decent surface had fissured and exposed what lay beneath. It was a sight to force his retreat so as to take stock of what was happening. The for so long toyed-with notion of a house of innocence far from the West End and what it represented was now a matter of urgency. The house would stand for

the old values and dignity, and would be as unlike that in *The Spoils of Poynton* as it would be possible to imagine. Poynton is the temple to the god of acquiring, collecting and amassment. This short novel about a mother who values her *objets d'art* more than her son's happiness is James's preparation for the devastating criticism of society which would be given full expression in *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age*. In these stories it would not be an ageing moralist who condemned the loss of standards and the new vulgarity, but uncomfortably observant adolescents, young girls who were conventionally supposed not to see or hear what was going on.

During the summer of 1897 one of those little avalanches of coincidence which, though not uncommon in life, are best kept out of fiction, occurred to Henry James during a visit to Bournemouth. One day, immediately after reading a volume of the letters of Edward FitzGerald which W. Aldis Wright had edited, James went for a stroll and met and talked with the brother of 'Posh' Fletcher, the poet's fisherman friend. As if this were not coincidence enough, a letter inviting him to FitzGerald's Suffolk coastline awaited him on his return. It was from an American cousin holidaying at Dunwich. He went, and soon the five of them – the cousin had brought her three daughters with her – were exploring the neighbourhood. Two things had particularly struck James as he read FitzGerald's letters: the ancient resonance of place-names like Saxmundham, and the constant by-play made by the poet of his forsaking of society for cosy rural seclusion, his reluctance to come up to town, and his comically extravagant preference for being out of things. Although Fitz had been dead for fourteen years his presence seemed to pervade the little east Suffolk towns which Henry James was now seeing in all their remoteness. Extraordinarily remote to him was Beccles.

Soon after his return from Suffolk, James sealed his own withdrawn future by signing a twenty-one years' lease for Lamb House, Rye, at £70 per annum. The rusticated die was cast. It was there a year later that, now with full mastery of his new 'spoken' story-telling art, he poured out to his stenographer MacAlpine *The Awkward Age*. Ignoring the limits set by magazine editors, he let the long novel flow on until all was said. The creation was swift and was completed between September and December 1898. It opens with Mr Longdon, an elderly bachelor from Beccles (he is fifty-five, the same age as the writer), waking up to the perils threatening society, and closes with his rescuing of a girl from a milieu which has long since made it impossible for her to know the meaning of innocence. The girl is Fernanda Brookenham and she is the grand-daughter of Lady Julia, a woman who was the epitome of the old social virtues, and whom the youthful Longdon hopelessly loved.

Fernanda – Nanda – will encounter the not-too-fustian remnants of these virtues at old, quiet, warm-bricked Lamb House which, in the novel, like Santa Casa, has been wafted, lock, stock and gardens, from Rye to Beccles. Mr Longdon has to visit London after an absence of thirty years to gain first-hand knowledge of its moral decline. Henry James has to abandon it after almost as long being part of its intricate social culture to gain a perspective on its failings. *The Awkward Age* is about the desertion of principle, about being young and growing old, and about what happens to young and old alike when they are caught up in one of society's periodic ethical scene-shifts.

But as others have pointed out it isn't just Nanda's and Mr Longdon's generations which are at the 'awkward age'. With the nineteenth century nearly over and the twentieth almost upon them, all the characters are ill at ease and are without the poise of Lady Julia or the certainties of Mr Longdon. Mrs Brookenham, Nanda's mother, is exquisitely awkward and James's description of her helplessly running into obstacles, instead of being protected from all danger by her birthright, is just one aspect of the magnificent portrait he has drawn of a woman who is both captivating – and nothing. Her son Harold, light-fingered and runtish, is decidedly awkward to have around. Her husband doesn't care enough to be awkward about her lover – which is subtly awkward for their friends. The lover, Vanderbank, is made awkward by his own attractiveness which is openly commented upon by both men and women. Mitchy is the awkward creature of the times, the millionaire tradesman's son who is too rich to be excluded from society. Lord Petherton sponges on him, as does Harold for trifling amounts, and as will the Duchess, in effect, when she captures him and his fortune for her niece Agnesina. The Duchess's relentless duenna-ship has kept every awkwardness from her Little Aggie, presenting her, immaculate at the altar, to Mitchy, who is not supposed to find Petherton's subsequent interest in her awkward at all. Only the servants reveal a complete absence of awkwardness as they announce entrances and effect exits, are sharply ordered about, and abide their time. 'Mrs Brook' and her set, knowing that they see all, are cold and peremptory with them. James has taken them straight from a drawing-room stage drama of much door-opening.

The complexity into which Mrs Brook and her set, and most of all Mr Longdon, are thrown is as much the result of dawning freedoms as disobedience towards the old restraints. While underhandedly breaking the old rules they have no longing for change. Threatened by it, their response is either cruel and vulgar or, in one of the group's in-phrases, 'too beautiful'. (The handsome but invalid Jonathan Sturges, like Vanderbank aged thirty-four, had been James's guest during the writing of

The Awkward Age and had called the Rye fishermen's 'What Ho!' 'too beautiful'.) Too beautiful intentionally was the talk in Mrs Brook's salon in fashionable Buckingham Crescent, too deliberately clever and lovely for what lay behind it to show, at least not too realistically. 'There are more things [to talk about] in London . . . than anywhere else in the world; hence the charm of the dramatic struggle reflected in my book, the struggle somehow to fit propriety into a smooth general case which is really all the while bristling and crumbling into fierce particular ones,' said Henry James in his later Preface to the novel. Certainly a 'fierce particular' issue which was struggling from the 'smooth general case' at this time was that of the New Woman. Vivien Jones has drawn attention to the fact that *The Awkward Age* appeared at a moment when women's freedom and education were being hotly debated, and not long after the feminist Mrs Crackanthorpe had instigated in the press a series of articles on female emancipation under the title 'The Revolt of the Daughters'. James's sister Alice too had a very radical tongue on such matters, and while his Nanda must not be at all closely connected with a *fin de siècle* women's movement, her having her own sitting-room, latch-key, servant, her freedom to visit friends or receive them on her own, smoke, etc., and especially to decide her own future, do point to something stronger than lack of supervision. Though the last thing that she herself wants to be is liberated by such behaviour. Having the terribly unwanted knowledge of the free goings-on all around her, she would far rather be her grandmother Lady Julia than any woman of her own day. Mr Longdon saves her by taking her back with him to the ideals which her contemporaries are challenging. It is these, not he, that she weds.

And then there is the question of money, on the personality-distorting effects of which Henry James is as astute as Jane Austen. Mitchy the shoemaker's son has £40,000 a year, but the aristocratic Brookenhams, with their town house and their apparently modest place in Gloucestershire (they call it 'The Hovel'), have had to obtain a modest £1,200 a year to stay afloat. The rich but modest-living Mr Longdon pumps Van hard on the Brookenhams' means. Van is evasive. It is not that he thinks it strange or tasteless that such inquiries should be made on the very first night of their acquaintance but that, as somebody who himself contrives to exist in society on a small salary for which, unlike anyone else in the novel, he works hard, he wants to show Mr Longdon how they forget money at Mrs Brook's. '*She* must have had something,' persists the old man, who of course remembers her background. 'Yes, indeed, she had something – and she always has her intense cleverness. She knows thoroughly how. They do it tremendously well . . . Oh, they're all right,' says Van evasively. Mitchy, much later on, more accurately reflects the

group's hard interest in wealth when he describes Mr Longdon as 'bloated'.

By then the latter has made up his mind to '*doter*' Nanda, as the Duchess frankly puts it, and he would similarly *doter* Van if lack of money restrained him from proposing to her and making her happy. But Van has no intention of marrying his lover's daughter because she has been sullied by the too-free conduct of the Buckingham Crescent set of which he is the Apollo. Knowing that charmers must charm before the charmed begin to smell a rat, James allows us to like and even admire Van very much, until mounting evidence of his astute self-protection undermines our pleasure in him. Only part of his leisure is spent talking at Mrs Brook's; there are regular weekends at country houses where her son has witnessed his less cerebral diversions. His sitting-room is crammed with photographic trophies in rich frames, the pin-ups of the age. He doesn't love Mrs Brook, who is six years his senior though still very beautiful. Intimacy is achieved by the very free stylized talk for which her salon is famous. But she loves him, and so does her daughter Nanda, needless to add. So would any woman. Van exists to receive the kind of love which he cannot return. But Nanda is not 'any woman'. Her mother knows this and it embarrasses her. Long before Nanda knows that Van will reject her, she has made up her mind to reject him because she recognizes that, ungiving though he is, he is all that her mother possesses, all that she has. Such a profound understanding is further evidence of her undesirable maturity. Nanda has certainly acquired something during her unfortunate wanderings betwixt schoolroom and drawing-room – kindness and wisdom. There is the question of her plainness. Mr Longdon finds it incomprehensible. As she is the image of Lady Julia, how can she be plain? In this, as in every other matter to do with ageing men having to come to terms with changing values, Henry James is speaking highly personally via his *alter ego* from Beccles.

As he approached his fifties James became more and more preoccupied, not so much with lost youth, as with the varying measurements of childhood's comprehension of what it was witnessing. Nanda's was to be the ultimate degree of such comprehension to be placed beneath his microscope. The asexuality of children was part of the preferred Victorian dream and he was then more than ever before drawn to frequent explorations of this fantasy. Neither he nor his sister Alice had been able to refrain from the comparison of English and American girlhoods in particular, with their very differently set standards of freedom, education and protection. The novelist had long observed that in Britain these standards had been so ritualized that an adolescent girl was often neither free, taught nor safe. In much of Europe there was severity under the

ritual, and a virgin could still be delivered ignorant to her husband-to-be. That she should be so was indeed the major duty of her mother. English mothers tended towards a conventional acceptance of the rites but did not press the rules. A woman who had been married from the schoolroom might well resent the sudden ageing which could occur when, still under forty, a replica of herself at eighteen, her hair up for the first time and ravishing in her first adult finery, descended to the drawing-room. It was a piquant situation which attracted many writers. It is the opening dilemma of Ouida's novel *Moths* when Lady Dolly, aged thirty-four and the toast of the French Riviera, is unable to prevent her sixteen-year-old daughter from joining her. 'What on earth shall I do with her?' – meaning, 'How can I hide her?' English girls, coming out, were credited with the strengths of innocence, yet it was in ignorance that they were married-off, swiftly to give birth and thus set the entire guarded process in motion once again.

Mrs Brook, Henry James's most brilliant creation in *The Awkward Age*, was married-off in her teens, knowing nothing, to a nobody. They had four children, two of whom are kept well out of the story, two of whom provide its threats. Now forty, she sees all too clearly the wastes ahead of her 'lovely, silly eyes'. Whether the Duchess, her husband's cousin, was married off to her Italian duke, we are not told. Certainly there appear to have been no wastes either before or during her widowhood. One feels that she made a career out of being a wife and is now making a second one out of being an aunt, a duenna in the grand continental tradition. Henry James is intensely interested in precocity, his Duchess dreads it. 'Don't understand, my darling – don't understand!' But when Mr Longdon is shown Aggie's photograph, one of the many in Van's bachelor rooms, he destroys the artifice by saying, 'She's very beautiful – but she's not a little girl.' Van then reveals his own sexual sophistication by lightly explaining that Italian girls develop early and, anyway, he never had been able to tell how old or how young girls are. However, he is quite inexperienced in the kind of relationship which is now rushing ahead over cigarettes in his rooms, after rain had forced him and Mr Longdon to leave Mrs Brook's in a four-wheeler. Their question and answer session leaves them mutually spellbound. What is admitted at this first meeting lays down the ground-plan of all that is to follow. Opening the story by means of the beginning of a friendship between two men so ethically distant that they have to build all kinds of bridges in order to communicate is one of James's most fascinating devices. Here the old commonplace of fiction – the dramatic conflict ensuing from the injustice of there being one law for men and quite another law for women – is used to bring a startling new impetus to the subject: and this via the

creaky old business of chaperonage. Van's many affairs cannot impair his eligibility or make him impure. For sixteen-year-old Aggie even to have heard (and understood) about affairs could fatally compromise her as a marriage prize. For nineteen-year-old Nanda, a naturally intelligent young grown-up who can truthfully say, as any person her age surely must be able to say, 'there was never a time when I didn't know *something* or other and that I became more and more aware as I grew older, of a hundred little chinks of daylight', there is no eligibility at all. It has long vanished. Her mother knows it; it is why she no longer makes any semblance of constraint.

Leon Edel suggests that we may see in Nanda and Aggie a double projection of Henry James himself in late adolescence, that part of him which was continentalized by travel and nourished with the forbidden fruit of French novels, and that other side of him which was the serious young literary novice making what he could of his native New England environment when he was Nanda's age. The young are violated most by conventional forms of social protection, and by the not-so-young's erotic interest in the stages of their maturing. The manner in which the Duchess promotes a sensual interest in Aggie's purity, though expert and socially admirable, comes close to that of a bawd. Nanda, on the other hand, with no 'purity' to display, emancipated from all this little-girl whiteness, has access to the many shades of existence. This is what terrifies her mother and her circle. Aggie and Nanda, says Henry James in his Preface, 'were projected as small things, yet finally had to be provided for as comparative monsters'. One of them had been removed 'from the sphere of the play of her mind' by early marriage, the other had not.

The Awkward Age is fitted together in ten books or sections which are made to span Mr Longdon's remembrance of his past and Nanda's contemplation of her future. His history determines her fate. Although Book One is entitled 'Lady Julia', it is really about her unsuccessful lover's sudden wish to follow up the careers of her descendants after many years. He expects their London to be very unlike his, but is bewildered by the changes. Like Edward FitzGerald, he exaggerates his Suffolk provinciality as he catechizes Van. 'You do put one through!' says the young man who finds that although his elderly new friend has no presence, he had 'somehow an effect'. Mr Longdon pumps him shamelessly for facts. Blatant questions on his income and habits are put in order to loosen him up for the real information required, that on Nanda. It leads Van to a denunciation of London's vulgarity and corruption which is Henry James's own criticism of the life he has fled from.

'But beauty, in London . . . staring, glaring, obvious, knock-down beauty, as plain

as a poster on a wall, an advertisement of soap or whisky, something that speaks to the crowd and crosses the foot-lights, fetches such a price in the market that the absence of it, for a woman with a girl to marry, inspires endless terrors and constitutes for the wretched pair – to speak of mother and daughter alone – a sort of social bankruptcy. London doesn't love the latent or the lurking, has neither time, nor taste, nor sense for anything less discernible than the red flag in front of the steamroller. It wants cash over the counter and letters ten feet high. Therefore, you see, it's all as yet rather a dark question for poor Nanda – a question that, in a way, quite occupies the foreground of her mother's earnest little life.'

This is the ferocious London which jeered at the first night of *Guy Domville*. Van, who is more part of it than he would wish, and who has already privately likened Mr Longdon to a priest, opens his worldly heart to this probing visitor. 'You see we don't in the least know where we are. We're lost – and you find us.' It is Mr Longdon's intention to do more than just find Nanda, he means to save her, to free her from the smart cant which masquerades as high culture and emotion at Buckingham Crescent.

The florid Anglo-Italian Duchess with her loud and certain pronouncements is the foil to Mrs Brookenham and her now fearful uncertainties. The Duchess has 'bloomed in the hothouse of her widowhood', as Van cattily puts it, and now she is exclusively and entirely engaged in damping down the slightest sexual fire in or around her niece. Fanned by marriage, let them rage as they will. 'Mr Longdon's impenetrability crashed like glass at the elbow-touch of this large, handsome, practised woman who walked for him, like some brazen pagan goddess, in a cloud of queer legend.' We hear of her 'acquired Calabrian sonorities, from her voluminous title down' and can see her as the perfect Edith Evans role. The Duchess urges Mrs Brook to marry Nanda off . . . 'soon . . . and while you *can*'. Men won't marry girls who have been 'pitchforked into everything'. Mrs Brook defends her failure to prevent Nanda from discovering about life by saying, 'The sort of men *I* know anything about . . . are not looking for mechanical dolls. They're looking for smart, safe, sensible, English girls.' Unconsciously she gives herself away. Nanda is not safe. But neither has she been 'pitchforked' anywhere; she has gone where she has gone by her own free will – even to Tishy Grendon's unrespectable house – and as a natural part of growingup. The verbal battles between Mrs Brook and the Duchess are comic and serious, the dialogue sparkling and tender by turn. Mrs Brook's pitiful situation is seen in all its vulnerability as troubles beset her from every side, to her bewilderment more than anything else. Why is she, Lady Julia's child, in this position? How did it happen? In her beloved salon is she talking her way into relationships which are superior to affairs, or talking her

way out of a disaster? Her helplessness and her wit are entrancing. They make her desirable to the reader but not to her family and friends, not really. She is spellbound by their disenchantment, and alone when they are present. Her predicament is great, but no Mr Longdon comes to save *her*. She would like her daughter and herself to live together like two intelligent women, neither concerned with what the other does. What is happening to them is happening throughout society – 'We're all in the troupe now . . . and we must travel with the show.' Nanda 'has her little place with the circus – it's the way we earn our living.' The Duchess is impatient with Buckingham Crescent's art-form conversations. She has returned to find that 'most English talk is like a quadrille in a sentry-box'. Like Mr Longdon, she has been away from London long enough to find nothing as it once was. She booms forth on vanished values, not comprehending that she is giving them too foreign an emphasis. She is a monument from Henry James's wanderings in Italy, and he delights in her stage-worthiness, giving her plenty of good lines.

Her opposite is Mitchy, the boot-manufacturer's son. He has no pretensions, which is just as well in that circle. He is young, pleasantly ugly, badly dressed and enormously rich. At the beginning of the novel the Duchess insultingly suggests that he might do for Nanda – 'We must take what we can get, and I shall be the first to take it.' Not many pages pass before the Duchess takes him for Aggie, he with his tolerance, awkwardness and his 'little deep-down delicious niceness, and sweet sensibility', plus, of course, his barnacle-like friend Lord Petherton to bring Aggie out. Nanda does not blame her; it is her way of discovering her identity, and she has a right, at sixteen, to behave badly. James spares the reader not a jot of the coarseness of the Victorian marriage mart, and through Mr Longdon and Nanda he makes a plea for the virtues of the single state. Mr Longdon's wealth is used, not to catch her but to free her. Asked about marriage, Nanda says, 'I shall be one of the people who don't. I shall be at the end one of those who haven't.' She goes to live with Mr Longdon, the man who should have been her grandfather, at Beccles in all the serenity of Lamb House. Nanda's independence is awesome. She has not come out, she has stepped out from all the trammels with which society confines and restricts women, and will do as she likes. It is, if one may be allowed a pun, a wry ending.

Leon Edel sums up this conclusion with characteristic percipience:

> Mr Longdon achieved what Henry James had done all his life – harbour within his house, the house of the novelist's inner world, the spirit of a young adult female, worldly-wise and curious, possessing a treasure of unassailable virginity and innocence and able to yield to the masculine active world-searching side of James an ever-fresh and exquisite vision of feminine youth and innocence. For

this was the androgynous nature of the creator and the drama of his novels; innocence and worldliness, the paradisial America and the cruel and corrupt Europe – or in other variations, youthful ignorant America and wise and civilized Europe.

In no earlier novel had James called British society so to account. *The Awkward Age* records his complete disenchantment.

Just as at a party or gathering one makes a stab at what is actually occurring, what is really being said, below or beyond the flood of talk and sociability, so one must make an effort to see and hear beyond the quicksilver talk and very slow movement of *The Awkward Age*. It is the surface alone which leads one to the story's depths, this shimmering surface which rises without warning to glitteringly dangerous points, or lurches into blackness and vulgarity. Mrs Brook's own talk attracts multiple conclusions which, drawn as they are from the conversation of a woman who uses her own drawing-room as a confessional, make one apprehensive and questioning. The action is sparse, the talk torrential. The diarist Ivy Jacquier, after reading *Portrait of a Lady*, commented, 'He writes no novels, it is one long frieze and he depicts a part, and what he does not depict goes on, before and after, like life of which one can only know one part.' In *The Awkward Age* it is customary to see only Nanda, Aggie and perhaps Mr Longdon as innocents who are, in their different ignorances, getting to know what is going on. But what of those who think they know, like Mitchy, or are sure they know, like Van and the Duchess, or who cannot bear to know, like Mrs Brookenham? Or, more crucially, the reader himself? The curtain has gone up and will, in Chapter XXXVIII, come down on something perfectly dramatically begun and ended, but with nobody knowing all they should, the reader included. Self-knowledge can be obtained only at a cost, at being defiled by 'knowing'. A conventional marriage alone permits a young woman to 'know', and thus proceed to self-knowledge. Aggie is thrust through the convention by her old-fashioned aunt so that she can break out, not settle down. Nanda, self-aware, dismisses marriage.

RONALD BLYTHE

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