HENRY JAMES

The Major Phase

F. O. MATTHIESSEN

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK

Henry James, at the age of 62

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FOR
MY INSTIGATORS,
ESPECIALLY
J.C.L.
P.T.R.
H.W.S.

Contents

Preface

THE hundredth anniversary of the birth of Henry James drew forth such a varied and fitting range of tributes that in the year after that celebration it may seem hardly useful to devote another book to him. The creative writers of my generation have recognized and assimilated his values. Auden and Spender, no matter how widely they have diverged from Eliot in politics and religion, have continued to agree with him that James is one of the few great masters of our modern literature. Practitioners of the novel who have taken its art seriously have long since responded to the high claims which Percy Lubbock made for James' technique in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921).

Yet the view of the wider public is still quite other. It is the view that—so far as American readers of history and literature are concerned—has been conditioned by Van Wyck Brooks and Parrington. Brooks' thesis, developed in *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* (1925), and not materially altered in his later evocations, is a very simple one. James was a writer of vivid and original talent who made the fatal mistake of becoming an expatriate, who thus cut himself off from the primary sources of his material, and whose works thereby lost freshness and declined until they became at last hardly more than the frustrated gestures of 'an habitually embarrassed man.' Parrington devoted two

pages to 'Henry James and The Nostalgia of Culture.' This was one of his least happy efforts to satisfy the demands of his publisher by making his magnificent account of the evolution of our liberal thought seem more inclusive than it really was, a general 'interpretation of American literature.' Far more solidly influential than Brooks' impressionism, Parrington's work has been the cornerstone for subsequent intepretations of our intellectual history. But in the case of James, Parrington did little more than follow Brooks' lead in deploring the novelist's deracination and cosmopolitanism. He granted some importance to his 'absorption in the stream of psychical experience,' but concluded with a sentence that reveals how far off base he was in his demands from the novelist: 'Yet how unlike he is to Sherwood Anderson, an authentic product of the American consciousness!'

Such a sentence is eloquent evidence of what happens when you divorce the study of content from form. Even more startling conclusions can be reached when, like the later Brooks, you neglect form and content alike, when you merely allude to books instead of discussing and analyzing them, and reduce literary history to a pastiche of paragraphs culled from memoirs. It is my conviction that *The Wings of the Dove* searches as deeply into the American consciousness as *Winesburg, Ohio*. But in order to appreciate either book, you must be equally concerned with what is being said and with the how and why of its saying. The separation between form and content simply does not exist as the mature artist contemplates his finished work. That separation is a dangerous short-cut taken by critics, and its disasters are written large over the history of James'

reputation. For a single symptomatic instance of the result of a critic's allowing himself to be conditioned by such generalizations as Parrington's, Herbert Muller writes, in his preface to *Modern Fiction: A Study in Values* (1937) that he has 'given little attention to matters of technique, making only a passing bow to writers like Henry James who have brewed genteel little tempests in exquisite teapots.' He would have been far more accurate in his values if he had trusted the testimony of Edith Wharton, who had learned from James as her chief master that: 'For him every great novel must first of all be based on a profound sense of moral values and then constructed with a classical unity and economy of means.'

This last view is the one with which I also approach James. It is a particular pleasure at this time, when the vitality of our future culture will have to depend more and more upon its international relations, to dwell upon James as a forerunner of such an awareness. In diametric opposition to Brooks and to our recent nativists in painting and the other arts, I would hold with Auden that a modern man can hardly be said to know his own country until he has known some other country—though such knowledge is really an attitude of mind and does not necessarily depend on travel. I do not argue that expatriation is either a good or a bad thing for the artist, since that depends entirely upon the man and what he can make of his experience. At any rate, it does not seem to have damaged the work of Shelley or Ibsen or Turgenieff or countless brave anti-Fascist refugees of our time.

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ork that has been done about him, and does not
be done again. In that regard I am particularly
that Joseph Warren Beach, in *The Method of*
mes (1918), made a systematic canvass of that
nder the headings of Idea, Picture, Revelation,
Point of View, Dialogue, Drama, Eliminations,
mance, and Ethics. That study still remains the
duction to James' art, and may be supplemented
Blackmur's edition of James' own prefaces, under
f *The Art of the Novel* (1934). A rewarding book
written about James in terms of his relation to
tion of the nineteenth-century novel; and such a
ld find much of its spade-work done in Cornelia
elley's painstaking study of *The Early Develop-*
Henry James (1930). Since Miss Kelley went
ames' many reviews and essays about Hawthorne,
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to whom he was indebted, and related them to
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ıd again. Moreover, the quality of the work of
ly prime has been charmingly evoked through
Rourke's essay on the humor in *The American.*
; likewise from many other special studies, I
able to concentrate on what interests me most,
at works of his final maturity. Stephen Spender
he Destructive Element, an enthusiastic account
ıe modern writer can find in James, while the

darker passages of his mind, the debatable implications of his ambiguity, have been probed—from the opposite angles of the psychologist and the moralist—by Edmund Wilson and Yvor Winters. Until now, however, there has been relatively little detailed examination of his final period as a whole, and in particular of his three major novels, *The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove,* and *The Golden Bowl,* and of that fourth, unfinished book, *The Ivory Tower,* which gave every promise of ranking with his best.

I agree with James' own estimate that *The Portrait of a Lady* was his first masterpiece, but that twenty years later with *The Ambassadors* he began to do work of a greater depth and richness than any he had approached before. My understanding of his development has been increased by the rare opportunity of reading through the hundred and fifty thousand words of his unpublished working notebooks, which, extending from 1878 to 1914, concentrate most heavily on his aims and ambitions during the crucial period of the eighteen-nineties.[1] The material from these notebooks, which provided the structure for my opening chapter, proves by itself more than ample refutation of Brooks' whole thesis of flight, frustration, and decline. What one sees is James' own growing consciousness of hitherto unplumbed powers, as his first anxious and tentative hopes yield to the finally assured confidence of the master craftsman that he is going to realize his potentialities to the full. The notebooks show that he had his first ideas for his three crowning works eight to a dozen years

1 An edition of these notebooks is being prepared by Kenneth B. Murdock and myself. (Published in 1947)

ıeir completion; and the pursuit of those ideas to ıated embodiment has given me my subject. Aes- iticism, if carried far enough, inevitably becomes ticism, since the act of perception extends through of art to its milieu. In scrutinizing James' major have tried also to write an essay in cultural his- showing the kind of light that such novels throw ın their time.

ıserve the singleness and wholeness of my subject ad to turn away from certain by-paths, which I obably enough has been said in the last few years merits of *The Turn of the Screw,* but the whole of James' handling of the ghost story could make sting chapter. I have myself tried elsewhere to could be discerned of James' self-portrait of the treating as a group his short stories dealing with ive life.[2] Neither *The Bostonians* nor *The Prin- massima* is one of James' complete successes, but gether they could show his curious excursion into ns kind of social novel, and could reveal also the ıixture of perception and blindness in his grasp al issues. Another omission, which I would have far more, has been avoided by smuggling into an an evaluation of *The Portrait of a Lady,* in the ames' revisions. That essay, though falling out- ıain theme, is relevant to it, since through exam- ıt James was after in revising his earlier work, other aspect of his final period.

as nearing my conclusion, a distinguished pro-

preface to *Stories of Artists and Writers by Henry James* tions, 1944).

fessor asked me what I was doing, and forgetting that he was uneasy with any literature since Trollope, I told him, only to be asked: 'What are you going to call it? *The Old Pretender?*' I had forgotten that once bright, if long since hoary, wisecrack, but that conversation gave me my title. I realized more clearly than before that though James' later evolution had involved the loss of an engaging lightness, he knew what he was about, and that if we want to find the figure in his carpet, we must search for it primarily in the intricate and fascinating designs of his final and major phase.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first obligations are to Mr. Henry James, the nephew of the novelist, who has given his uncle's notebooks and letters to the Houghton Library at Harvard; and to the officers of that library, who have permitted me to use this material. The substance of my book was delivered as the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto in the fall of 1944, and I am very grateful for the opportunity that was thus provided to discuss an international theme in a country whose cultural bonds with our own will, I trust, become ever stronger.

The frontispiece is the work of Kathrine E. McClellan who, as the photographer for Smith College, took this picture for the occasion when James lectured there on 'The Lesson of Balzac,' in the spring of 1905. I want to thank Newton Arvin and Mrs. Grierson, the librarian of Smith

ollege, for bringing it to my attention, since it represents ames during the period with which I am most concerned, t the height of his development, and gives a fine impres- on of both sensitiveness and strength.

I have borrowed several passages from my essay on Henry James and the Plastic Arts,' which appeared in *he Kenyon Review* (Autumn 1943); and the Appendix is irtually a reprint from *The American Bookman* (Winter)44).

Every student of James is indebted, at all stages of his search, to LeRoy Phillips' admirably meticulous bibliog- aphy. My other debts extend again to the friends who ave read or heard my manuscript, to C. L. Barber, Theo- ore Spencer, and Mark Schorer. I undoubtedly owe even ore than the great amount of which I am conscious to arry Levin's comprehensive knowledge of the novel. It is ten impossible for me to tell where my ideas leave off nd his begin. But I owe still more to a group of Harvard ndergraduates who, during the tense winters of 1942 and)43, kept insisting that until they were needed by the rmy, they meant to continue to get the best education ey could. Wiser than many of their elders, they refused be distracted from primary values. When I said, half eaning it, that a book on Henry James was to be my veraged contribution to the war effort, they urged me to serious. They believed that in a total war the preserva- on of art and thought should be a leading aim. They rsuaded me to continue to believe it.

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I

The Art of Reflection

EIGHTEEN NINETY-FIVE was the great turning point of James' career. He was fifty-two, and his one moment of wide popularity, as the author of *Daisy Miller,* lay almost twenty years behind him. *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) had been moderately successful, but his next two novels, *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima,* for both of which he had cherished high hopes, had almost served, as he wrote Howells, to reduce the demand for his productions to zero. Even while engaged with *The Tragic Muse* (1890), he had announced that it was to be his 'last long novel,' and though he still proposed to do short stories—'a multitude of pictures of my time, projecting my small circular frame upon as many different spots as possible'—he was soon to believe that he had found his 'real form' in the play. That illusion was to persist for five years, until the crashing failure of *Guy Domville.*

We can follow now, as we have not heretofore been able to, the course of James' hopes and intentions, as he recorded them in his notebooks. When he had returned to America in the autumn of 1881, after his first half-dozen years of continuous residence in Europe, he had declared that he had 'lost too much by losing, or rather by not having acquired, the note-taking habit. It might be a great profit to me; and now that I am older, that I have more

time, that the labour of writing is less onerous to me, and I can work more at my leisure, I ought to endeavour to keep, to a certain extent, a record of passing impressions, of all that comes, that goes, that I see, and feel, and observe.' He felt particularly 'the need of summing up': 'I have done it little in the past, but it will be a good thing to do it more in the future.'

The impression conveyed by these initial pages of self-assessment is a curious one. As James runs over the chief events of his European experience, we cannot help thinking of the intellectual vacuity that had so distressed him in what he called the 'often trivial chronicle' of Hawthorne's notebooks. James is incisive enough on what he conceives to have been the main decision of his career, the decision to live in Europe. Six years have reinforced him in the rightness of that choice for his temperament and talents. He sees it not as an escape but as his assumption of the peculiar burden of being an American writer: 'The burden is necessarily greater for an American—for he *must* deal, more or less, even if only by implication, with Europe, whereas no European is obliged to deal in the least with America. No one ever dreams of calling him less complete for not doing so'—though as James looked ahead, he conjectured that 'a hundred years hence—fifty years hence perhaps' the European painter of cultures would have to reckon with our civilization as well.

But once James turns from such a penetrating generalization to the notation of what he remembers, he gives us, for the most part, a picture of the empty social world of the tourist. From his first brief stay in London he recalls only how few visits he paid. The following winter in Paris was

more rewarding, for though he had hated the new boulevards and hadn't managed to escape the detestable American 'set,' still he had become an habitué of the Comédie Française, and had made the acquaintance of Turgenieff, 'most delightful and lovable of men,' and of Flaubert, 'a powerful, serious, melancholy, manly, deeply corrupted, yet not corrupting, nature.' But he saw that he would be destined to remain 'an eternal outsider,' and decided then to make his residence in London.

The odd thing about his account of his life there is that it shows him hardly less an outsider. For page after page he might well be any fastidious but amiable young American with a sufficient bank account to allow him to give his time to somewhat vague cultural pursuits. He enumerates the country houses where he stayed, and how the season soon became a 'terror'; how 'the club question' became 'serious and difficult,' since one must have a club if one was to remain in London; and how finally the Atheneum proved 'an unspeakable blessing.' He found many other advantages for a bachelor, in contrast with the interruptions of New York, where ladies invited one to call before lunch. To be sure, he could draw up 'a tremendous list of reasons' why London too 'should be insupportable': 'the fogs, the smoke, the dirt, the darkness, the wet, the distances, the ugliness, the brutal life of the place, the horrible manners of society . . . You may call it dreary, heavy, stupid, dull, inhuman, vulgar at heart and tiresome in form.' But for 'the artist'—the word comes almost as a shock in this context—for 'one who has the passion for observation and whose business is the study of human life,' it is the most rewarding place in the world.

On the evidence of his notebooks you might well question how much of the city he saw, but *The Princess Casamassima* shows that he missed little, even of its submerged and desperate poverty. The same split between apparent emptiness of experience and what he could make of it—the split that has bothered nearly every critic of James—can be read in the one outline he gives of his usual day, not in London but in Venice: 'I went out in the morning—first to Florian's, to breakfast; then to my bath, at the Stabilimento Chitarin, then I wandered about, looking at pictures, street life &c, till noon, when I went for my real breakfast to the Café Inadri. After this I went home and worked till six o'clock—or sometimes only till five. In the latter case I had time for an hour or two in gondola before dinner. The evenings I strolled about, went to Florian's, listened to the music in the Piazza, and two or three nights a week went to Mrs. Brown's.' Nearly every glimpse of his personal life, in his letters as well, is just as decorous and mild, quite separated from the real concerns of any community. Not at any point in his 'summing up' is there a sign of a major intellectual or emotional event, or of any intense human relationship, save in the moving pages which describe the death of his mother. Arnold Bennett doubted whether James 'ever felt a passion, except for literature.' Yet James himself, looking back to his youth and its years of uncertainty and physical suffering, could dwell most on their 'freshness of impression and desire, the hope, the curiosity, the vivacity, the sense of richness and mystery of the world that lies before us . . . Never was an ingenuous youth more passionately and yet more patiently eager for what life might bring.' And the book he was working on, after drifting over to Venice from Nice and Mentone in 'the genial society' of two ladies, was not some mildly scented travel sketches, but the poignantly mature *Portrait of a Lady*.

A like discrepancy between means and ends might strike the further reader of James' notebooks, which, after this 'summing up,' consist, year after year, mainly of his first record of ideas for his stories. These came to him most frequently through conversations with ladies at dinner. A typical short entry reads: 'Note here next (no time today) the 2 things old Lady Stanley told me the other day that the former Lady Holland had said to her, & the admirable subject suggested to me yesterday, Sunday, at Mrs. Jennes' by Mrs. Lyon Binton's (& Mrs. J's) talk about F. H.: the man marrying for money to serve him for a great political career & public ends.' Or it is Mrs. Anstruther-Thompson, at Lady Lindsay's, telling him about a son who has sued his mother for his property. The most usual topics are the marriages, the liaisons, and the divorces of the rich, and as we reconstruct the scene and envisage the dark serious man inclining his head gravely now to the right, then to the left, we can hardly fail to be struck with how far he has drifted from the social world of his inheritance. Both his father and his elder brother were militantly democratic, and both reacted strongly against such occasions as made Henry's nightly fare, and carried away a sense of the hideous and overpowering stultification of a society based upon such class distinctions. Occasionally, after years of this society, Henry indicates that he understood what his kinsmen meant, as when something that Lady Tweedmouth said, in the mid-nineties, about 'the insane frenzy of futile

occupation' suggested to him that 'a "subject" may very well reside in some picture of this overwhelming, self-defeating chaos or cataclysm toward which the whole thing is drifting.'

If many of his entries seem to show him a docile recorder of surfaces, that quickens our interest for any signs of how he went about to transmute so much idle gossip into the very different texture of his fiction. He made several solemn dedications to his art. He declared, while working on *The Bostonians,* 'A *mighty will,* there is nothing but that! The integrity of one's will, purpose, faith!' It is grotesque to find that such a resolution sprang from nothing more formidable than the need to escape from house parties. But as we come upon other such declarations in equally odd contexts, we are forced to recognize that James was himself like the aspirant to fiction whom he advised to 'try to be one of the people upon whom nothing is lost.' He was able to make much out of little. Sometimes, in these communings with himself, more relaxed than any of his published work, we seem to stumble upon the most artificial verbiage, as when he says: 'O art, art, what difficulties are like thine; and, at the same time, what consolation and encouragements, also, are like thine? Without this, for me, the world would be, indeed, a howling desert.' But no matter how much this language may sound like that of a belated dilettante of the romantic movement, we must not be fooled by it. James knew precisely what he meant, and he meant important things. For when he states, 'One does nothing of value in art or literature unless one has some general ideas,' we recognize that, like Poe, James was one of the few Americans to have grasped the truth that practice cannot be separated 'from the theory which includes it.' And he knew that theory must continually be tested by the 'frequent, fruitful, intimate battle with the particular idea, with the subject, the possibility, the place.' It was out of long years of both theory and practice that he wrote, just before undertaking *The Tragic Muse:* 'Here I sit: impatient to work, only wanting to concentrate myself, to keep at it: full of ideas, full of ambition, full of capacity —as I believe. Sometimes the discouragements, however, seem greater than anything else—the delays, the interruptions, the *éparpillement* &c. But courage, courage, and forward, forward. If one must generalize, that is the only generalization. There is an immensity to be done, and, without being presumptuous, I shall at the worst do part of it. But all one's manhood must be at one's side.'

The most fertile period to follow through his notebooks, the period of his most crucial decisions, is that inaugurated by his dramatic years. He had long wanted to work for the stage. Indeed, in his 'summing up,' he had described such work as 'the most cherished of all my projects.' He believed that he had mastered the French theater and that he knew what he was after, but he had been slow in finding the right opening. Only at the end of the eighties, when Edward Compton asked him for an acting version of *The American,* did he resolve upon the sustained experiment of writing several plays. He was completely aware of the unfavorable omens, of 'the vulgarity, the brutality, the baseness of the condition of the English-speaking theater today.' But he was eager to respond to the challenge: 'To take what there *is,* and do it without waiting forever in vain for the preconceived—to dig deep into the actual and

get something out of *that*—this doubtless is the right way to live.'

But despite all his effort, his plays were a failure, not merely on the stage but in themselves. William James believed that he knew the reason: Henry had drifted in his surroundings so far from 'the vital facts of human character' that he could hardly hope to project dramatic tensions. The inertness in form, so surprising to find in James, seems due most to his determination to meet existing conditions half way, a compromise that gained him nothing and that destroyed the tight structure which had come to distinguish all his fiction.

He was never to regret having made this experiment, which bore the most valuable consequences for his later development. Despite the appearances that misled his brother, he had never flagged in his desire for fresh experience, and now the chance of working with a theatrical company had given him a renewed sense of 'all the big suggestive, swarming world around me, with all its life and motion—in which I only need to dip my ladle.' But he knew that he 'must dip with a free and vigorous hand.' He resolutely dedicated himself anew to 'the terrible law of the artist—the law of fructification, of fertilization, the law by which everything is grist to his mill—the law, in most, of the acceptance of all experience, of all suffering, of all life, of all suggestion and sensation and illumination.'

In the midst of the delays and disappointments of the theater, he found a release by dipping also 'into the *other* ink—the sacred fluid of fiction.' During these years he produced some of his best short pieces. As he said, 'the dimensions don't matter—one must cultivate one's garden. To do

many and do them perfect: that is the refuge, the asylum.' The harvest included *The Real Thing, The Middle Years, The Coxon Fund,* and several other stories dealing with the problems of the creative life, *The Altar of the Dead,* and *Owen Wingrave,* James' one story to treat the theme of war, an eloquent denunciation of its brutality. During these years he also kept growing in his conviction of the supreme importance of subject. The more he saw, the more intensely it came home to him that subjects of 'solidity,' of 'emotional capacity' were 'the only thing on which, henceforth, it is of the slightest use for me to expend myself. Everything else breaks down, collapses, turns thin, turns poor, turns wretched—betrays one miserably. Only the fine, the large, the human, the natural, the fundamental, the passionate things.'

The discrepancy is again wide between such a declaration and many of his first sketches of possible themes. For instance, a typical anecdote that he set down in the fall of 1892 would not seem to promise many of the abundant attributes to which he was aspiring. It was the situation 'suggested by something lately told one about a simultaneous marriage, in Paris (or only "engagement," as yet, I believe) of a father and a daughter—an only daughter. The daughter—American of course—is engaged to a young Englishman, and the father, a widower and still youngish, has sought in marriage at exactly the same time an American girl of very much the same age as his daughter. Say he has done it to console himself in his abandonment—to make up for the loss of the daughter, to whom he has been devoted. I see a little tale, *n'est-ce pas?* in the idea that all shall have married, as arranged, with this characteristic

consequence—that the daughter fails to hold the affections of the young English husband, whose approximate mother-in-law the pretty young second wife of the father will now have become.'

As he goes on to outline the possibilities in this complication of the international marriage, envisaging that the son-in-law might be French, but that the others are all to be 'intensely American,' what seems uppermost is a mechanically manipulated structure. The only suggestion of how such a theme might yield, not just 'a little tale,' but one of his longest novels, comes through some further remarks on how he believed he could arrive at great subjects. 'It all comes back to the old, old lesson—that of the art of *reflection*. When I practice it the whole field is lighted up—I feel again the multitudinous pressure of all human situations and pictures, the surge and pressure of *life*. All passions, all combinations, are there.' The most intent reflection conceivable on every ramification of this special theme was to end, a dozen years later, in *The Golden Bowl*. 'Reflection,' as James was aware, was only a shorthand suggestion of an intricate process. He expressed himself more comprehensively in another entry: 'To live *in* the world of creation—to get into it and stay in it—to frequent it and haunt it—to *think* intensely and fruitfully—to woo combinations and inspirations into being by a depth and continuity of attention and meditation—this is the only thing.'

Only occasionally does one of his themes seem richly human in its very first sketching. He began a fresh notebook in the fall of 1894 with several pages on the subject that was to prove his most rewarding. 'Isn't perhaps something to be made of the idea that came to me some time ago and

that I have not hitherto made any note of—the little idea of the situation of some young creature (it seems to me preferably a woman, but of this I'm not sure) who, at 20, on the threshold of a life that has seemed boundless, is suddenly condemned to death (by consumption, heart disease, or whatever) by the voice of the physician? She learns that she has but a short time to live, and she rebels, she is terrified, she cries out in her anguish, her tragic young despair. She is in love with life, her dreams of it have been immense, and she clings to it with passion, with supplication.' The 'emotional capacity' of this subject is at once manifest, even though James is by no means sure yet of the details of his plot, and is thinking that he may make it into a three-act play, 'with the main part for a young actress.' Shortly after this he became involved with the rehearsals for *Guy Domville*, the only one of the five original plays he had now written that reached the stage; and there are only two or three further entries during the balance of this year.

He confronted himself with his play's catastrophic reception, at the opening of the new year, in characteristic fashion: 'I take up my *own* old pen again—the pen of all my old unforgettable efforts and sacred struggles. To myself—to-day—I need say no more. Large and full and high the future still opens. It is now indeed that I may do the work of my life. And I will.'

What follows is the most revelatory sequence in all his notebooks. In the face of adversity he is filled with an abundance of new projects. The first he sets down is an ironic comment on his own situation: 'The idea of the poor man, the artist, the man of letters, who all his life is