NO. 4

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PAMPHLETS
ON AMERICAN WRITERS 65 CENTS

Henry James

BY LEON EDEL

PAMPHLETS ON AMERICAN WRITERS · NUMBER 4

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS · MINNEAPOLIS

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Printed in the United States of America at
the North Central Publishing Company, St. Paul

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 60-62855

fourth printing, with revisions, 1963

Distributed to high schools in the United States by
McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.
New York Chicago Corte Madera, Calif. Dallas

PUBLISHED IN GREAT BRITAIN, INDIA, AND PAKISTAN BY THE OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS, LONDON, BOMBAY, AND KARACHI, AND IN
CANADA BY THOMAS ALLEN, LTD., TORONTO

HENRY JAMES

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Henry James

HENRY JAMES was the "largest" literary figure to come out of America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was not "large" as Melville is large; he did not have Melville's global vision, nor did he dream of epical landscapes. His largeness stemmed rather from the literary territories he annexed to the New World and the career he fashioned in two hemispheres. At a time when American literature was still young and certain of its writers were still sharpening their pens, Henry James crossed from the New World to the Old and was able to take his seat at the table of fiction beside George Eliot and Turgenev, Flaubert and Zola. He found the novel in English still the easy undisciplined and relaxed form it had been from its early days, and he refashioned it into a complex work of literary art. If he was junior to the fellow-craftsmen whom he joined in Europe, he achieved, in the fullness of time, a status equal to them, and in some instances he surpassed them. For he was not only a practitioner of fiction; he was one of its finest critics and theorists. It was he who gave us the terminology most useful in our time for the criticism of the novel.

Henry James wrote for fifty years; he was a prolific writer and several times glutted his own market in the magazines. Never a "best seller," as we know best sellers today, he nevertheless earned an honorable living by his pen. He was fortunate in being born into an affluent family; but from his early twenties he began to earn his own way and wholly by literary work. He was alone among major American writers in never seeking any other employment. He was devoted to his art; and his productivity did not

influence his meticulous style — that style by which he believed a writer gains his passport to posterity. At first his prose was fresh and clear; later it became magnificently weighted and complex in its allusiveness and imagery — and accordingly in its evocative power. His goals remained always aesthetic. He believed from the first that the artist in fiction is a historian of that part of life never found in history books: the private life that goes on behind the walls of dwellings, but which is also a part of the society in which it is lived. Literature for him was the great repository of life; and he believed that if the novel is a mirror in a roadway, it reflects not only the panorama of existence, but the countenance of the artist in the very act of experiencing the world around him.

During his five decades of creation he brought into being some twenty novels and one hundred and twelve tales, some of them almost of novel length. He was the first of the great psychological realists in our time, on a much more complicated and more subtly subjective level than his Russian predecessors, Turgenev, Tolstoi, and Dostoevski. In his productivity and the high level of his writing, in his insight into human motivation, and in his possession of the architectonics of fiction, he was a remarkable innovator, constantly fertile, bold, and independent — and a man with a style. R. P. Blackmur has imaged him as a sort of Shakespeare of the novel, in the power with which he brought into being, at the century's turn, with extraordinary rapidity, his three magisterial works — *The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove,* and *The Golden Bowl* — as Shakespeare set down in fast succession his three great tragedies at the turn of another century. René Wellek has spoken of James as a kind of American Goethe, Olympian in his view of literature and life, certainly in his capacity to hold both at arm's length as he analyzed and reflected upon them — upon poetry and truth, man and reality. Such a continuing reassessment of James's reputation — so recently set aside and disparaged — may bring him

to his proper place among the world's large literary figures, and establish him among the greatest artists of the novel.

Criticism indeed has not done sufficient justice to Henry James's uniqueness in fiction. He alone created the cosmopolitan novel in English and made of it a rich study of men, manners and morals on two continents. More significant still, he was able to treat both as comedy and as tragedy his transatlantic vision of the New World's relations to the Old. In doing this he anticipated the central fact of the twentieth century—America's assumption, among the nations of the world, of those international responsibilities from which it once isolated itself. James early recognized the drama of the confrontation of the New World and the Old—at a time when the Americans were too busy on their own expanding continent to be aware of it, and when Europe considered itself sufficiently distant to be able to ignore its transatlantic offspring, or to be interested in it essentially as the land of Fenimore Cooper's Indians or as a land to be viewed with that "certain condescension" of which Lowell complained.

In James's fiction Americans are often treated as if they still possess the innocence of Eden; and in their unawareness of evil they are shown as highly vulnerable once they venture outside their American paradise. This large drama James projected, during his later phase, as a drama of consciousness, for he had a profound sense of man's inner life. All his virtuosity was addressed, in his fiction, to discovering how to capture in words the subjective, the reflective, and even the phantasmagorial side of man.

It is because Henry James wrote so much and experimented so widely, was so complex a literary "case," that criticism has found it difficult to see him whole. In recent years, however, his authority and his vision have increasingly imposed themselves, and certain of his formulations have entered into the very texture of twentieth-century literary thought. As one of the first modern

psychological analysts in the novel his influence has been pervasive. Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, Dorothy Richardson are among the many novelists who derived technique or aesthetic ideas from the fount of Henry James. It was no accident that even during his lifetime certain of his fellow-novelists abroad addressed this American in their midst as "Master."

The literary career of Henry James extended from the last days of the American Civil War to the middle of the first World War. He was born in New York City and belongs, in America's literary annals, with two other sturdy children of Manhattan, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman. The three can now be seen as distinctly urban artists: their vision was of the sea-girt city and of the ocean; of ferries and teeming commerce, and a city-community — as distinct from the vision of the rooted children of the orchards and woods of Concord. Thus, where the New England writers were more abstract and philosophical — their works still linked to the pulpit and the sermon in spite of a disengagement from them — the writings of the New Yorkers dealt with things more concrete and palpable. Melville's glimpse of faraway life in the Pacific made him forever a great cosmopolite of the spirit; and Henry James's transatlantic life made him a cosmopolite of fact. Walt Whitman, for all his "cosmos," dealt in concretions. All three paid their respects to a "flowering" New England, but they represented on their side a great urban "flowering" — a great urban impulse — in the new American literature.

It is not surprising that James, in later years, was to speak of his Concord predecessors as "exquisite provincials," and indeed, of Thoreau, as being "worse than provincial — he was parochial." He said this not in an altogether derogatory sense: he was simply describing their limited untraveled state, their adherence to the

homely, the worldly wisdom that came out of reflection on native ground rather than out of action and life abroad. James spoke of them as would a cosmopolite for whom the Old World and the New had figured as a kind of double-landscape from the very first. For, although he was born just off Broadway, at No. 21 Washington Place, he was taken abroad when he was less than six months old. He opened his eyes of childhood upon European lawns and gardens; and one of his earliest memories was of the Napoleonic column in the Place Vendôme. Nevertheless he was returned to Manhattan when he was just learning to walk. If his eyes had first observed Europe, his feet planted themselves firmly upon American soil — that of Washington Square, within a stone's throw of where he had been born and the Square that would furnish him with the title of one of his most popular short novels. He spent a boyhood in the streets of what was then "uptown" but what is today the lower part of Fifth Avenue. With summers in Staten Island, and trips up the Hudson, with the familiar teeming scenes of Broadway, and in a New York of muddy streets with chickens on the sidewalks and pigs rooting in the gutters, James reached the age of twelve a thorough little Manhattanite.

His grandfather had been an Irish immigrant who amassed a large fortune in Albany. His father was a religious visionary who embraced the exalted dreams of Swedenborg and Blake. His elder brother, William James, grew up to found at Harvard the first psychological laboratory in America, to write the *Principles of Psychology*, and to become America's philosopher of pragmatism. The senior Henry James had a comfortable income and was a restless wanderer. Twice during his adolescence Henry was taken to Europe, from twelve until sixteen, and again during his seventeenth year. The father gave his sons tutors and governesses, and Henry attended an assortment of schools, but his education was erratic. Much of it was carried on in European museums, galleries,

and parks. From the first, the future novelist had before him the two worlds: the early-forming America, in all of its indigenous rawness and with its European borrowings – and the European scene, as a series of cities, Geneva, Paris, London, and the Boulogne-sur-Mer of Thackeray, as well as the suburbs of the British metropolis.

Henry was a sensitive and shy boy; he tended to assume a quiet observer's role beside his active elder brother. He was an inveterate reader of novels; indeed it might be said that no novelist before James had had so thorough a saturation in the fiction of both sides of the Atlantic. Having learned French in his childhood, he read through shelvesful of French novels as well as the great English novelists from Richardson to the then-serialized Dickens and Thackeray. His father spoke of him as a "devourer of libraries"; for a while the parent worried about this and attempted to make his son attend a preparatory school for engineers. Henry resisted this experience as he was to resist the study of law two or three years later. He wanted to be simply "literary" and he realized this goal more rapidly than might have been expected.

On the eve of the Civil War the family returned from the third of their European journeys and settled at Newport in Rhode Island. The seventeen-year-old Henry here formed a friendship with John La Farge, the painter, his senior by several years, who guided him in his reading of French works and encouraged him to begin writing. During the early weeks of the war Henry suffered a strained back while helping to put out a fire and this "obscure hurt," as he called it in his memoirs, kept him from military service. In 1862 he registered at the Harvard Law School but soon withdrew, for he was already writing short stories and book reviews.

The earliest identified piece of fiction is an unsigned tale, "A Tragedy of Error," published in the *Continental Monthly*, a New

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York magazine, in February 1864. It is a precocious tale, lurid and melodramatic, yet strangely talented. It reveals that James, at the threshold of his manhood, already possessed a vigorous grasp of certain storytelling techniques which were to guide him in all his work and culminate in the remarkable architecture of his final novels. His second tale dealt with life on the civilian front of the Civil War and was accepted by the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1865 when he was twenty-two. From then on the pages of this magazine were open to him. The *North American Review* and the newly founded *Nation* accepted his book reviews and when William Dean Howells began to work for the *Atlantic* he gave James encouragement and editorial support, recognizing at once that he had to do with a young man of extraordinary talent. Indeed by the time James had published half a dozen short stories a reviewer in the *Nation* spoke of him as one of the most skillful writers of fiction in America. However, from the first, the critics complained that his heroes did not lead a life of action; they tended to be self-absorbed and reflective, and the tales themselves took as their subjects problems in human behavior. The stories of this early period deal entirely with the American scene and show the leisurely existence of the well-to-do in Newport, Boston, and New York. James's models were largely French: Balzac, Mérimée, George Sand. But his writing at this time shows also an attentive reading of Hawthorne.

There is a touch of Hawthorne in "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" (1868), first of the many ghostly tales James was to write. His most ambitious story of this period was "Poor Richard" (1867), which described a young man's helplessness in courtship when faced with rather vigorous rivals. James republished a few of these tales, much revised, in England in a series of volumes called *Stories Revived* (1885), among them "A Landscape Painter" and "A Day of Days" of 1866, "A Most Extraordinary Case" (1868), and "A Light Man" (1869). Later he disavowed all his

early stories and chose to date his literary debut from the appearance of "A Passionate Pilgrim" in the *Atlantic Monthly* during 1871.

During 1869 and 1870 Henry James went abroad on his first adult journey. He was twenty-six and the experience was unforgettable. For the first time he crossed the Alps into Italy, but before doing this he renewed his old boyhood impressions of London. Here he found Charles Eliot Norton, the Harvard professor of fine arts who had published him in the *North American Review*, and through Norton met William Morris, Rossetti, and Ruskin. He also paid a call on Darwin. As he traveled, he gradually became aware of the theme that was to be central to his writings: he observed his journeying fellow-Americans in hotels and pensions, captured their sense of dislocation while trying to imbibe foreign culture; he studied particularly the itinerant American families with passive mothers and undisciplined children, and noted the absence from their lives of any standard of culture and behavior. These were the shortcomings of American innocence. On the other hand James was not blind to certain other aspects of life abroad; it is striking how often the adjective "corrupt" precedes the word "Europe" in his writings. He found in the old countries, nevertheless, a continuing spectacle of life and art. The Italian towns on their hillsides, the spires of the churches gleaming in the landscape, customs and manners bearing witness to time and tradition, served as a constant stimulus to his imagination. The galleries of Europe provided a feast for his eyes. His complaint on returning home was at one with Hawthorne: in America there was only raw nature, the forest primeval, and a broad, daylight prosperity. Eden would have been a dull place for a novelist.

While he was in England the news reached him that his beloved cousin, Minny Temple, to whom he had formed a deep if un-

voiced attachment, had died. This was the climax of his "passionate pilgrimage"; and it was to be remembered in *The Portrait of a Lady* and years later in *The Wings of the Dove.* The twelvemonth of wandering in England, France, and Italy – the countries in which he was to travel for the rest of his life – had set the scene for all his future. He was to remain satisfied with this terrain; he traveled neither to Spain nor to the Isles of Greece; he only briefly visited the Low Countries, and on two trips cast a hurried glance at Munich. The capitals in Jamesian geography, extending from the New World to the Old, were Boston and New York, London, Paris, and Rome. Florence and Venice were way stations. And occasionally James explored the rural scenery of these countries. But his particular landscape was that of the affluent and civilized humans who peopled or visited these places and whose lives he dealt with as a part of a continuing Americano-European *comédie humaine.*

Before Henry James recognized that this was his fundamental theme, he made a serious attempt to discover what he could accomplish as a writer within the United States. Twice between 1870 and 1875 – first in Boston and then in New York – he sought systematically to gain a livelihood by the writing of fugitive journalism and fiction within the American scene. In Boston he wrote a short novel entitled *Watch and Ward.* For a brief moment he entertained the common fantasy of novitiates in fiction that this would be a Great American Novel: even the supersubtle James allowed himself this cliché-dream of overnight fame and power. Set in Boston and its suburbs, the novel told of a wealthy young man who adopts an orphan and rears her in the hope she will some day become his wife. The strange thing about this novel was James's failure to paint any background; he became fascinated by the relationships between the orphan, her guardian, her suit-

ors; but the story might have taken place anywhere. Nevertheless in the book may be found an early sketching out of some of the material he would use with finished art in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

More important, at this time, was James's writing of "A Passionate Pilgrim." In it there is the rhapsodic note of his rediscovery of Europe. The tale has all the ingredients of James's later "international" stories: the narrator, discovering Europe, infatuated with the things of the Old World; the contrast of American cultural bareness with the old traditions and manners of Europe and at the same time the awareness of the New World's egalitarianism, for if the American protagonist dies in England, there is an Englishman at the end of the story who goes forth with new hope to replace him in America.

During his stay in Boston James continued to write book reviews; and he tried his hand at art criticism. Early in 1875 he went to New York, spending the winter there, but found it artistically — and financially — unremunerative. Between these brief "sieges" of Boston and New York he made another journey to Europe, spending in particular a winter in Rome (1872–73) where he met many American artists and closely observed the life of the long-established American colony on the banks of the Tiber. Out of this experience came his first important novel: *Roderick Hudson.* In substance and setting it seems to take up where Hawthorne left off in *The Marble Faun.* Hawthorne attempted a characteristic "romance," reworking, in terms of the real and the mystical, the Puritan struggle between guilt and goodness in a Roman setting. James, on the other hand, wrote a novel romantic in theme — that of an American artist destroyed by his passion for a beautiful woman — yet realistic in its painting of the American art expatriates in the Holy City. On a deeper level *Roderick Hudson* reflects the conflicts that were experienced by James

during his search to discover what it meant to be an American, and an artist, at this moment of history. If the novel did not find the answer, it at any rate stated the problem and weighed the possibilities. Written in a clear and highly readable style, it suffered from the excesses of first novels: the author was trying to say too much, to cram too many future novels into this one. Yet it is a work of great charm and feeling; compared with the novels being published in America at the time, it is indeed an extraordinary performance.

The novel was completed in New York in 1875 and ran through twelve installments in the *Atlantic Monthly*. With it James established the pattern by which he was to earn his living for the next forty years — that of publishing a serial in a magazine and thereby assuring himself of a steady monthly income, and augmenting this by the writing of articles, reviews, and tales. It was clear to him now that he could expatriate himself without difficulty. He could live more cheaply in Europe, and make money by his travel articles; he would find the material for his fiction and have the leisure in which to write it. By 1875 Henry had devoted a full decade to periodical publication; and now he made a substantial debut between book covers: in that year appeared *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales*; a collection of travel articles, *Transatlantic Sketches*; and the novel *Roderick Hudson*. From this time on he was to publish a book or more every year — drawing upon the great backlog of his periodical writings, which he never exhausted, to make up the volumes of tales, criticism, and travel that came out at the same time as his novels.

In the autumn of 1875 he settled in Paris and one of his first acts was to call upon the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev. James had greatly admired his work and he found in this older writer a congenial mentor. If from Balzac James had learned how to set a scene and launch a drama, and from Hawthorne how to suffuse the

drama with charm, and from George Eliot the value of endowing his story with intellectual illumination, he learned his most important lesson of all from Turgenev. This was to make his novel flow from his personages. The Russian writer provided James with the concept of the "organic" novel; he helped James to see that the novel need not be a haphazard story, but one in which characters live out their natures. This might be called "psychological determinism," and James was to become perhaps the greatest (and often misunderstood) exponent of it in his work. He was one of the rare writers of fiction to grasp the psychological truth that an action properly derives from a character, that a novel creates the greatest illusion of truth when it grows out of a personage's observations and perceptions. This is why, in James, we find an insistence upon the fundamental truths of human behavior, rather than the cheerful coloring of these truths indulged in by so many of his contemporaries. Like Turgenev and the other Russian novelists – but at an opposite emotional pole – James concerned himself with character above all else, and with people in relation to one another. Unlike the characters in Russian novels, James's personages tended to subordinate their emotions and passions to their intellect; but with extraordinary subtlety James could show the force of passion and emotion beneath the intellectual façade.

Turgenev took James to meet Flaubert; and in Flaubert's apartment, high in the rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, the American made friends with Zola, Edmond de Goncourt, Daudet, Maupassant. Later he was to know Loti, Coppée, and Bourget, who became a particularly close friend. If he had found the men of Concord to be "exquisite provincials," he felt that these Parisians lived also within narrow horizons. He felt indeed, and understandably, that he was more cosmopolitan and possessed wider experience of the world than they did, if less experience of an immediate physical environment. He ruefully remarked in a letter home that he could

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