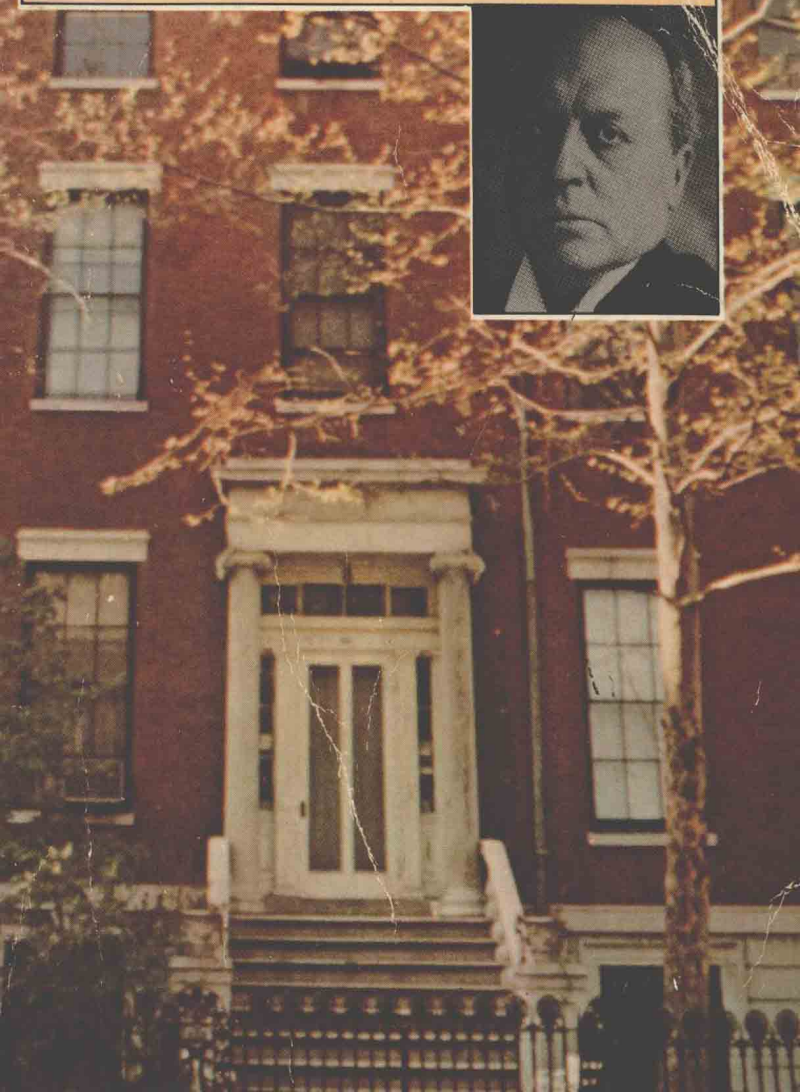


THE PORTABLE HENRY JAMES

Revised Edition
Edited by MORTON DAUWEN ZABEL



THE PORTABLE

HENRY JAMES

EDITED, AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY

MORTON DAUWEN ZABEL



Revised by Lyall H. P. Powers

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PENGUIN BOOKS

THE PORTABLE HENRY JAMES

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INTRODUCTION

I

Henry James once spoke of how "the private history of any sincere work . . . looms with its own completeness." In another place he wrote that "the figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations. . . . Their being finely aware—as Hamlet and Lear, say, are finely aware—*makes* absolutely the intensity of their adventure, gives the maximum of sense to what befalls them."

On both occasions James was defining principles for the art to which he devoted his entire life—the art of fiction. But it is safe to say that he also spoke with conscious reference to himself, to his own adventure in the eventful age he witnessed and his own way of turning it to account. The world of readers and critics was slow to admit the intensity of that adventure or to recognize the "maximum of sense" James gave it. His private history was not of the kind that "looms large" with the dramatic capacities in action or passion that have made a whole host of modern writers—from Goethe, Byron, and Dostoevski to Rimbaud, Yeats, Lawrence, and Lorca—vivid figures in the mythology of the human spirit. Outwardly viewed, his career was unspectacular. It was the art and mind by which he enriched it that made it a great life and that continue to make James one of

the most interesting figures in the drama of the past century.

Henry James was born on April 15, 1843, in Washington Place in New York City. Fifty years earlier his Irish grandfather had come to America where he established himself in trade in several cities of New York state, prospered handsomely, married three times, and when he died in 1832 left a fortune of three million dollars to his children. By his third wife he had a son called Henry, who rebelled against assuming the family business and devoted himself instead to the study of religion, philosophy, and humanity. This son married at the age of thirty, and four sons and a daughter were born to him and his wife, the oldest son being called William after his grandfather, the second Henry, after his father. In 1843 these two infants were taken across the Atlantic by their parents to spend part of a year in France and England, but the family returned to America and during the next ten years the children received their early schooling in New York and Albany. They were back in Europe in 1855 for three years, and again in 1859 for one. There Henry James went to schools in Switzerland, France, England, and Germany and discovered his passion for books and writing. Back in Newport in 1860 he tried studying painting, gave it up, attended the Harvard Law School briefly, gave it up, lived with his family in Cambridge, began to meet literary men like Charles Eliot Norton, James Russell Lowell, and William Dean Howells, resolved to become a writer, began his public career with a review in the *North American* in 1864 and a story in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1865, and in another ten years had his first book of tales ready for publication.

Meanwhile his love of travel took him to Europe on his first adult journey in 1869 and on two further

trips during the following six years. He studied the French theater at the Comédie Française; he put himself to school among the literary circles of Paris and London, forming friendships with Turgenev, Flaubert, Renan, Zola, Daudet, George Eliot, Ruskin, Morris, Tennyson, Browning, Gladstone, Morley, and other public figures in both countries; he explored Italy, Germany, France, and England. By 1876 he had established himself permanently in London, and he continued to live there and in Sussex for the rest of his life. His books—novels, tales, critical essays, accounts of travel—appeared in increasing numbers year by year. Success came early, and at least twice—with *Daisy Miller* in 1879 and *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1881—he knew public celebrity; but gradually his novels fell into public and critical disfavor. For five years, from 1890 to 1895, he devoted himself to making a success in the theater, but this effort ended in failure. He resumed the writing of fiction; produced a long series of books of increasing subtlety and originality; cultivated a great host of friends; revisited America after an absence of twenty-one years in 1904 and rediscovered his native land as a famous man; revised his major fictions for a handsome collected edition; again tried writing for the theater, again unsuccessfully; came back to America in 1910 with his dying brother William; returned to England; witnessed the outbreak of war in 1914 with shock and anguish; wrote a series of memoirs of his early years; tried to resume the writing of novels; became a British citizen in 1915 as a sign of loyalty to his adopted country; was taken ill in his seventy-third year; received England's Order of Merit on his deathbed; and died in February 1916.

It was a life which, apart from deep family affections, many devoted friendships, many travels, a few high mo-

ments of public celebrity and several of uncomfortable notoriety, was a record of little except incessant labor at the desk, many books read and many written, and finally a quiet death in the fullness of years. It was committed to a difficult and increasingly thankless kind of work, and in spite of James's extreme respect for his calling, his almost sacerdotal conception of the literary vocation, he was frequently beset by fears that his efforts had come to nothing. More than once he felt that he had "entered upon evil days," that his finest work had "reduced the desire, and the demand, of [his] productions to zero," that he was "condemned apparently to eternal silence." What he called the "complete failure" of the sumptuous New York Edition of his fiction left him, toward the end of his life, "high and dry"—"at my age . . . and after my long career, utterly, insurmountably, unsaleable"—and he called that crowning monument of his labors "a sort of miniature Ozymandias of Egypt ('look on my *works*, ye mighty, and despair')." He wrote his failure to win popular approval into a remarkable series of tales—"The Author of Beltraffio," "The Lesson of the Master," "The Death of the Lion," "The Middle Years," "The Next Time," and half a dozen others—which picture art as a tyrannical taskmaster who breaks his devotees when they are frail, tests them cruelly when they are strong, or grants them at best a secret victory which the world appears bound to condemn or ignore. It was with something like the defiance of a proud desperation that he told William Dean Howells, at one particularly bleak moment in his fortunes, that "some day all my buried prose will kick off its various tombstones at once."

We have seen his prophecy justified. When the hundredth anniversary of James's birth arrived in 1943 it saw his fame sweeping into the full tide of a revival that

has raised him to a position of supremacy among the novelists of the English-speaking world and given him a rank in the highest company of modern writers. The decade of the nineteen-forties and the years of crisis just preceding it witnessed a crowded procession of centenaries—anniversaries of artists and thinkers who helped to shape a momentous century in the life of Western man. Hardy, Zola, and Nietzsche, Swinburne, Pater, and Butler, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Anatole France, Cézanne and Renoir, Americans like Mark Twain, Howells, Henry Adams, William James, Bierce, and Lanier—in a time of danger and catastrophe the date of each of them sounded its knell on a darkening age and provided its occasion for revaluing the legacy, heartening or dubious, they left to their inheritors. None of them met a more dramatic recognition than Henry James. As if by a stroke of ironic justice, his own worst fears for his future were dispelled at a time that brought ignominy to much of the civilization he had most valued. "During our current afflictions," said one English tribute, "he has found a greater body of readers than ever before, who discover in him a mirror of the civilized enjoyments now in abeyance, a guardian of the values that war repudiates."

It was an axiom of the aesthetes of the nineties that nature imitates art. James's work makes us believe that history does so also. A great share of the history of his age now appears to find its permanent image in his pages. His books have become a standing example of what he meant when he told H. G. Wells in 1915 that literature "*makes* life, makes interest, makes importance . . . and I know no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process." Our present interest in James derives partly, no doubt, from the distrust of history and action that has been bred by the political and

moral disorder into which the world has fallen, by the prolonged crisis and sense of disintegrating traditions in which we have come to live. We see in him, by a species of retrospective logic, what men have always seen in their image-makers and heroes of form—what Santayana meant when he said, defining Proust's achievement, that "Life as it flows is so much time wasted, and that nothing can ever be recovered or truly possessed save under the form of eternity, which is also . . . the form of art."

The revival of James has bred its excesses of cult and sanctimony. They come partly from a natural pride—notably an American pride—in reclaiming the books that were for many years disputed or rejected by critics of many schools and prejudices: by realists, by patriots, by skeptics of culture, by reformers of society, by proletarians, all of whom combined to make the public forget that James had his faithful if limited audience through fifty years; that his tales and novels were printed in magazines on a scale that has become incredible in our own boasted age of literary freedom and experiment; that he met positive defeat only once—in his efforts to become a successful dramatist—and turned even that drastic disappointment to the advantage of his real work in fiction; and that his fellow writers had granted him the title of "Master." His critics preferred to charge him with most of the sins in the literary and American calendars—with repudiating his birthright, with being a snob, with falling indecisively between two cultures and finding himself at home in neither, with evading a full commitment to life, with accepting only the values of privilege and aristocracy, with excluding a great share of human misery and injustice from serious consideration. He was accused of being the "culmination of the superficial type," a man

who "doesn't find things out" and so produces "tales of nothingness"; of being "a fat, wistful remittance man with a passion for elegance"; of having "never succeeded in coming to grips with life"; of creating "the impassioned formalism of an art without content"; of "magnificent pretensions, petty performances!—the fruits of an irresponsible imagination, of a deranged sense of values, of a mind working in the void, uncorrected by any clear consciousness of human cause and effect"; even, finally, of being "simply not interesting: he is only intelligent; he has no mystery in him, no secret; no Figure in the Carpet."¹

This long bill of particulars includes some arguments with which every serious reader of James must eventually deal, but the verdict is now, on the whole, a very different one. As early as 1918 one of James's most perceptive followers had made bold to call him "the most intelligent man of his generation," and today critics of resolute astuteness and of radically different standards attest his distinction. "Henry James *is* a great artist, in spite of everything," says one of them; "his work is incomplete as his experience was; but it is in no respect second-rate, and he can be judged only in the company of the greatest." Another, asking only that he be permitted to define the novel in a way "neither difficult nor illegitimate," has said he would "be inclined to consider James as the greatest novelist in English, as he is certainly one of the five or six greatest writers of any variety to be produced in North America." A third has called James "a man who, if he had never written a novel, would be considered the first of short-story writ-

¹ The critics quoted are H. G. Wells (in *Boon*, 1915), Burton Rascoe, Somerset Maugham, J. Middleton Murry, Van Wyck Brooks (in *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*, 1925), and André Gide.

ers, and if he had never written a short story, the noblest of letter writers, and if he had never written anything would by his talk alone be known as a great man." A fourth has flatly asked, "What achievement in the art of fiction—fiction as a completely serious art addressed to the adult mind—can we point to in English as surpassing his?"¹

When controversy, enthusiasm, personal legend, and historic occasion combine in the rediscovery of a writer and make of it a significant episode in the history of taste, it is clear that he constitutes what James himself would have called a "special type"—that he was marked by circumstances as well as genius to play a significant role in the drama of culture. James held a high opinion of the artist's right to such a role. "To do something *great*" of which "the world shall hear" was one of his earliest ambitions. Once, in the earlier days of his conquest of England, he was a guest of Lord Rosebery and his Rothschild wife amid the splendors of Mentmore. "I have retired from the glittering scene, to meditate by my bedroom fire on the fleeting character of earthly possessions," he wrote home to his mother in America. "Tomorrow I return to London and to my personal occupation, always doubly valued after 48 hours among *ces gens-ci*, whose chief effect upon me is to sharpen my desire to distinguish myself by personal achievement, of however limited a character." The desire for fame and power, that "sense of glory" which had struck him in boyhood like a revelation in the Galerie d'Apollon in the Louvre, possessed him even though he felt the

¹ The critics quoted here are T. S. Eliot in *The Little Review*, August 1918; Edmund Wilson in *The Triple Thinkers* (1938); Yvor Winters in *Maule's Curse* (1939); Cyril Connolly in *Horizon*, May 1943; F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* (1948).

peril it entailed. He would certainly have agreed with what one of his contemporaries, Gerard Manley Hopkins, then wholly unknown to literature, once wrote in a letter to Robert Bridges: that "fame, the being known, though in itself one of the most dangerous things to man, is nevertheless the true and appointed air, element, and setting of genius and its works. What are works of art for? to educate, to be standards. Education is meant for the many, standards are for public use. To produce then is of little use unless what we produce is known, if known widely known, the wider known the better, for it is by being known it works, it influences, it does its duty, it does good. We must then try to be known, aim at it, take means to it."

What James aimed at in his art, what means he took to provide a standard for the use and education of men, what tests and scruples he met in the effort, and by what means his purposes were finally vindicated—all this makes his career one of the dramatic chapters in modern literature, and permits him to loom large in a way that has become a lesson in the persistence and integrity of the writer's vocation. But because James was a man who, contrary to a still-surviving derogation, did not live or work unaware of his role in history, it has become something more.

II

James published his first tale in 1865, when he was twenty-two years old. That date, in the career of an American, acts as an initial signal. The Civil War had just ended. The American nation, like James himself, stood at the threshold of a new age. Her literature had already passed through its successive formative phases. Each of them had found a man, some of them several

men, to voice its deciding impulse. Bradford, Mather, Edwards, and Franklin, Jefferson, Irving, Cooper, Emerson, and Whitman brought the republic by clearly defined stages—colonial, religious, revolutionary; frontier, pioneer, and nationalist—to the moment when several talents possessed of a vision more original and searching than any of these crowned the progress of the American spirit with what serious maturity in any ordained course inevitably entails: a moral challenge, a check to self-esteem, a warning to the will, a vision of the tragedy implicit in pride and success. The American mind, rooted in its hereditary conscience, had never escaped its hauntings by darker powers, its stirrings of ancestral guilt, what Howells was presently to call “the slavery implicated in our liberty.” Poe had recently imaged them unmistakably. But an enormous confidence in the American destiny allayed them until Hawthorne, Melville, and, in her Amherst seclusion, Emily Dickinson gave them their classic and prophetic definition. The Civil War came as if to certify their presence. An hour of judgment sounded. It called for a new order of intelligence in American life, a critical intelligence; and neither the victory of 1865 nor the prosperity that followed it in the North could disguise the summons.

No writer more than the novelist is so likely to prove, once his work is finished, that he was born at precisely the right moment to become the artist he was intended to be. Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoi, Proust, and Thomas Mann all illustrate the opportunity with which history favors the prose chronicler beyond any other type of artist. The literary novice of 1865 could hardly remain unaware of his special opportunity, particularly when, as in Henry James’s case, he saw the end—both triumphant and tragic—of a great national conflict in which a mischance of health had prevented him from

taking an active part and whose meaning he was made to feel with a special personal intensity. Already in 1865 James had declared his opposition to Walt Whitman's kind of visionary emotion, but he shared with Whitman the non-participant's sense of the crisis that befell the American nation in the spring of that year.

This is to say that several distinct tasks—two great tasks especially—presented themselves to the young writer of 1865 who was able to see their urgency. One was the problem of defining the point at which America had arrived in her venture of nationhood and of determining her relation to the rival civilization of Europe—a problem which, in spite of the fact that almost every serious American writer had already addressed himself to it, still remained unsettled in the balance-books of history. The other was the re-creation of the art of fiction as a form of critical intelligence by rescuing it from the debris of tradition and the compromises of popularity, and by raising it to the dignity of moral power which novelists like Balzac, Turgenev, and Flaubert had already won for it in Europe, but which only Hawthorne and George Eliot had reached in the novel of the English-speaking world. James saw, with the full insight of his youthful acumen, these two great opportunities at his disposal. He saw he had a major theme to treat, and he saw that a new kind of art was needed to treat it adequately; and he took these as the special tokens of his vocation in literature.

His subject was made inescapable by the family into which he was born. His Irish grandfather had provided the wealth that endowed his heirs with the privileges of comfort, travel, and social affluence. His father, another adventurer but in religion and philosophic speculation instead of trade, had converted those assets to the service of thought and imagination. The James home