HENRY JAMES AND HIS CRITICS

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PROFESSOR Pelham Edgar's book,* making its appearance when Henry James is becoming somewhat of a tradition in letters, performs timely service to this great master of the novelist's art. Focussing thought anew on a reputation exotic even in its own day, this appreciative study offers modern criticism the occasion for fresh valuing, and thus goes some way to settle the debated question whether this author is to be of the immortals; whether, in a word, *The Turn of The Screw*, *The Awkward Age* and *The Golden Bowl* are to take their place among the great heirlooms of literature; or, their high excellencies notwithstanding, are to become part and parcel of a forgotten literary limbo.

That Henry James can become popular with a future generation, can in fact *sell*, as he so signally failed to do in his own, is a miracle faith may not envisage. But, denied that broad compensation, can he still hold what he fondly called his "faithful few", the small but discriminating group who followed swift in the wake of his genius and accorded free and abundant recognition in the full flood of his activity? Disappointed in his own generation, he looked to the future for generous recompense. So it is now of prime interest to trace the critical eddies flowing from Professor Edgar's bold plunge into these waters of the past.

But a cursory survey of this eddying pool is enough to convince one that the time is not yet ripe. For under the same opposing shores of criticism emerge the same disputants who fought it out from the Eighties to the turn of the century. The lapse of a dozen years since his death in 1915 has left the fray just where it was, his final place in letters still lacking catholic sanction. In his heyday, James excited on the one hand virulent abuse and thick-witted misunderstanding, and on the other evoked quite extravagant adulation. His detractors complained of obscureness and lack of vitality, thinness of subject matter and tedious elaboration of statement. Their clamour, reverberating afresh from Dr. Edgar's book, is the best proof that Henry James is indeed of the quick.

The small band of his acolytes do him another kind of disservice, when with swinging censors they approach the mystic

* *Henry James: Man and Author*, by Pelham Edgar. Macmillans.

shrine. This idea of there being something esoteric and mysterious in his writings gains countenance from that famous piece, *The Figure in the Carpet.* But such occultists overlook the author's little jibe in its preface:—"What I most remember of my proper process is the lively impulse, at the root of it, to reinstate analytical appreciation by some ironic or fantastic stroke, as far as possible, in its virtually forfeited rights and dignities."

It is a curious delusion. For, if we put aside some difficulties of style in the later period, so noticeable in the all but baffling *Prefaces,* no one more valued clear-thinking and essential clarity of statement than Henry James, much indebted as he was to the French school. Further, it is difficult to recall a writer so completely self-revealing where matter of his art is concerned. Again and again he insists on form and substance, and it is with approval he writes of his friend and master, Ivan Turgénieff:—

> Nothing that Turgénieff had to say could be more interesting than his talk about his own work, his manner of writing. What I have heard him tell of these things was worthy of the beautiful results he produced; of the deep purpose, pervading them all, to show us life itself. The germ of a story, with him, was never an affair of plot—that was the last thing he thought of: it was the representation of certain persons. The first form in which a tale appeared to him was as the figure of an individual, or a combination of individuals, whom he wished to see in action, being sure that such people must do something very special and interesting. They stood before him, definite, vivid; and he wished to know, and to show, as much as possible of their nature.

Turgénieff's device of letting loose his chosen characters on the stage, there to work out their own destiny and relation in their own way, charming and successful as the result might be, could not be approved by James, so devoted to form, because it lacked "architecture." His own method was somewhat different. He proceeded from his prized and selected "germ" outward, spinning as it were a concentric fabric, embracing one by one his characters, whose part and participation became thus matter of very stringent law. Of this the finest, most compact and most difficult example is *The Awkward Age.* "The manner in which Turgénieff worked", he goes on, "will always seem the most fruitful. It has the immense recommendation that in relation to any human occurrence it begins, as it were, further back. It lies in its power to tell us the most about men and women. Of course it would but slenderly satisfy those numerous readers among whom the answer to this would be, 'Hang it, we don't care a straw about men and women: we want a good story!' "

Henry James selects his aspect, his slice of life, and squeezes out of it, drop by drop, every essence it may contain, bitter and sweet. He can never be popular in the circulating library sense, because he is concerned with the representation of character rather than the telling of a story. He has little or no plot, in the common acceptance of that term as applied to fiction. Nothing appears to happen—nothing, no more than in life itself, where three-meals-a-day go on in unbroken sequence notwithstanding the breaking of hearts, the corruption of souls. He has no plot, save the adventures of the mind and of the spirit, of behaviour and of manners. In his representation of life he is concerned only with the quintessence of civilization as he sees it—whether that be his view of the International Scene, afforded to his youth by frequent migrations of the James family and by his own later sojourn in Paris, and where the play of character arises from the impact of young and vigorous America upon the European strand, worn smooth and fine by the ebb and flow of the ages; or whether it be his leisured and inquisitorial survey of the London Scene, where he came finally to anchor: "On the whole", he writes in 1880, "the best point of view in the world." Mankind being the chosen subject, the point of view counts indeed, and that is why Henry James preferred these rich accretions of many generations to the America of his day, sappy with life, but lacking the *convenance* of traditional authority.

One of the soundest pieces of criticism in Professor Edgar's scholarly book deals precisely with this high competence of James in his selected field:—

> The formal element so fascinates us in James that we are tempted to explain his whole excellence in terms of style and composition. He carries to an unwonted pitch fastidiousness for the pregnant expression, and has more regard than all save a few of his contemporaries for the musical fall and resonance of his periods. A like fastidiousness governs his control of the larger compositional principles, and our critical vocabulary has not yet invented the terms which will explain his manifold devices for securing the perfect articulation of his theme. What we fail too often to perceive, or perceiving fail to emphasize, is that life and character are after all his paramount concern, and that though he may delight, as every artist should, in beauty for its own sake, yet his search for perfection is governed by the desire to give to life and character their fullest expression. Such a statement may appear to lose its efficacy if it is subjected to an immediate qualification, but I must hasten to add that James does not look upon life as an arena where gross and violent actions come into conflict. Civilization has done its full work upon

him; but if it has dashed his relish for the cruder forms of energy, it has not dulled but rather quickened his appreciation of the permanent elements in human character. We shall be rash to conclude that he has lost his sense of values. Conduct is no longer estimated in the rough, but tested on a very finely graduated scale that registers the minutest fluctuations of the spiritual flame.

In selecting his title, *Henry James: Man and Author*, Dr. Edgar is happily inspired, because he links the man indissolubly with his work, and it must be confessed that Henry, unlike Brother William, has small chance of life outside his books. A fine urbane figure in London society of his later years, he lacked the careless spontaneity, the charm and whimsicality that won for Charles Lamb, for instance, the love and regard of his contemporaries. It is impossible to think of James in any other relation. Dr. Edgar therefore takes a just view when he says in his preface:—"Gossip and anecdote will not be evoked for aid: and such stray wisps of biographical fact as drift into the record will serve only to indicate the conditions under which his work was produced." Anecdotage does not readily cluster round so aloof, so monumental a figure, whose very gambollings are elephantine, as the *Letters* testify. Beguiled as he is by the ripest fruits of civilization, he yet brings to that survey the austerity of the New England conscience. He observed life with passion; he does not seem to have lived it with gusto.

Through his wonderful sensibilities he traversed the whole gamut of human experience. But he missed the rough-and-tumble of life, so shrinkingly associated by him with the American Scene. Life, perhaps, was made too easy for him. His genius might have taken a more popular form if he had had to make a living by letters —not that one would wish it to have taken any other form whatsoever, but the postulation is not without interest when one considers his attitude to less fortunate craftsmen, to skilled cabinet makers like Arnold Bennett, or inspired rough carpenters such as H. G. Wells. What he sees most in Ibsen (whose genius, as illustrated in *Ghosts*, is so akin to his own) is his *provincialism;* and how he deplores those spendthrifts of their talent, Tolstoi and Dostoievsky! It is in the conditions of Turgénieff he finds his satisfaction:— "It is not out of place to allude to the fact that he possessed considerable fortune; this is too important in the life of a man of letters. It had been of great value to Turgénieff, and I think that much of the fine quality of his work is owing to it. He could write according to his taste and his mood; he was never pressed nor checked (putting

the Russian censorship aside) by considerations foreign to his plan, and never was in danger of becoming a hack.....Our Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, moralistic, conventional standards were far away from him, and he judged things with a freedom and spontaneity in which I found a perpetual refreshment." His own means were not ample, but he was independent; he thought himself poor, but that was because he lived in a large way—for a man of letters.

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A great and lasting value of this book lies in the fact that Dr. Edgar has thoroughly explored and documented his subject. The excellent index shows not a major or minor piece of fiction omitted from review. No other such record exists, and it is peculiarly worth doing, because some of the earlier works do not find place in the Definitive Edition of 1905-7, while others were more or less completely rewritten. It is said that Conrad expostulated with James about this remarkable revision, holding the original form to be a human document, not to be tampered with. James entered upon this self-imposed task with enthusiasm, and lavished upon it over two years of what otherwise might have been productive work, though the *Prefaces* ("Lucubrations") are to the discriminating worth all the toil and loss. "They are, in general, a sort of plea for criticism, for discrimination, for appreciation on other than infantile lines—as against the so almost universal Anglo-Saxon absence of these things which tends so, in our general trade, it seems to me, to break the heart", he writes to W. D. Howells as he is bringing the great task to a close.

The central idea was to bring all the fictions to the same key, the completed body to form for his time and his scene, but in a manner so more perfect and in a spirit so more true to life, a Human Comedy, comparable to that of Balzac. High was the value he set thereon. A "young man from Texas" has appealed through a friend for guidance in the study of his books. In sending him a list of five of his productions, James enjoins; "They are all on the basis of the collective and revised and prefaced edition of my things, and if he is not minded somehow to obtain access to *that* form of them, ignoring any others, he forfeits half, or much more than half, my confidence." The disillusionment was bitter. In the closing months of his life he writes to Sir Edmund Gosse:—"That Edition has been, from the point of view of profit, whether to the publishers or to myself, practically a complete failure; vaguely speaking, it doesn't sell—that is, my annual report of what it (the whole 24 vols.) does in this country amounts to about £25;

and the ditto in the U. S. to very little more. I am past all praying for anywhere; I remain, at my age and after my long career, utterly, insurmountably, unsaleable."

Comparison of these originals with their final form has great interest, though with the limited space at his disposal Dr. Edgar is perhaps a little ill-advised to go behind the Definitive Edition so often and so extensively. It were even a better book had he devoted to the major works the space he a little wilfully squanders on things that failed the test of inclusion in the Definitive Edition. His method is to deal separately with each piece, be it short story, *nouvelle* or full length fiction, summarising its plot and criticising its method, the while illumining the subject-matter with such admirable disquisitions on the art of his author as that quoted above. As has been hinted, he lacks at times a sense of proportion, is not without odd perversities, and fails in appreciation of such a perfect thing of its kind as *The Turn of The Screw* (most eerie of all ghost stories), or to rise to the height of the argument in that magnificent example of Henry James's "indirect" method, *The Awkward Age*—of all contemporary fiction the truest, the most colorful, the most ironic picture of London in the Nineties; London in joyous process of shaking off Victorian shackles, the London of newborn genius and awakened zest in life, the London of *Dodo* and *The Yellow Book.*

But he atones for these blemishes when he comes to deal with the great novels of the final period: *The Wings of the Dove, The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*, a trinity surely that must endure so long as the English language is read. For do they not beguile our intelligence with that tear-dimmed, starry figure, Milly Theale, valiant though doomed; with the quixotic adventure in Paris of that aesthetic New Englander, Lambert Strether; and, finally, with the thickly clustered story of Abraham and Maggie Verver, Charlotte and the Prince, that hushed spiritual conflict, with its deeps of passion and suspense, where each heartbeat vibrates?

In general, Dr. Edgar maps out this difficult country with certainty; and if at times his foot touches quaggy ground, he is quickly back on *terra firma.* Thus, discussing *The Golden Bowl*, he says:

> The novelist, whose main concern lies in these varied human relationships, has to tell us how people behave and think and feel under conditions that are devised to elicit their characteristic qualities. The more competent and conscientious he is as an artist, the less will he incline to promulgate his own opinions; therefore, in dealing with such a consummate artist as James

> it may seem hazardous to ascribe to him any dogmatic intentions of a moral kind. But glancing at large over the whole range of his work, we see that his faculty of discrimination is never idle, and more particularly does he compel us to feel in *The Wings of the Dove* and the present book that behind and beneath the artistic purpose there lies a moral intention at once distinct and measurable. His intense interest in how people behave implies necessarily a standard of values for human conduct; and when we have ascertained what this standard of values is, we are in full possession of his ethical system, which, to save him from any dogmatic imputation, we might name in all simplicity his art of living.

Manners Makyth Man is an ancient and honoured motto, and, as Dr. Edgar points out, it was with the beauty and decency of the human relation that Henry James was concerned. He has here perhaps said rather more than he intended, for certainly he is not imputing to his author Matthew Arnold's "moral and social passion for doing good", so blighting to the Victorian novel. That would be a basic misconception of Henry James's view of life and of art. What that view was, cannot be better expressed than by what he wrote of Turgénieff, in that most engaging of all his literary appreciations:—"No one could desire more than he that art should be art; always, ever, incorruptibly, art. To him this proposition would have seemed as little in need of proof, or susceptible of refutation, as the axiom that law should always be law or medicine always medicine. As much as anyone, he was prepared to take note of the fact that the demand for abdications and concessions never comes from artists themselves, but always from purchasers, editors, subscribers. I am pretty sure that his word about all this would have been that he could not quite see what was meant by the talk about novels being moral or the reverse; that a novel could no more propose to itself to be moral than a painting or a symphony, and that it was arbitrary to lay down a distinction between the numerous forms of art. He was the last man to be blind to their unity. I suspect that he would have said, in short, that distinctions were demanded in the interest of the moralists, and that the demand was indelicate, owing to their want of jurisdiction."

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Fruitfully provocative as is this book, one yet draws to its close with the distinct sense of being "let down." Dr. Edgar's method of subjecting every piece, however slight in itself, to descriptive analysis becomes a trifle tedious, and now and again his attitude to his great subject is a little pedantic—as of one who shall chide

a promising pupil; but where so much is fine and admirable, these things are forgiven and one braces one's self confidently for the final summing up, for the great last chapter which, quite definitely, shall determine once and for all the measure of Henry James. Alack! Unpardonable oversight of the printer, the last wonderful chapter is missing! But it is worse even than that, for in place of the strong pinion which was to carry us up and up into the Elysian vault, there to be shown Henry James enthroned among the gods, we are treated to a scratching of gravel in the backyard. "It is obvious", is his amazing conclusion, "that the predicament of James constitutes a very special case"—the predicament being that Henry James, outcast from America, was never acclimatized in Europe!

Unforgiven by the one, he was yet not taken into the heart of the other. Dr. Edgar appears obsessed by the spread-eagle criticism of an American writer, distinguished indeed in letters, but whose view of Henry James is jaundiced by the very fact of his expatriation, ending in 1915 with the damning assumption of British citizenship. Tame and mild, then, are the concluding words of this book:—"James, at the age of thirty, had absorbed all the American impressions that his nature was capable of receiving, and when he consulted his own convenience and peace of mind by his quiet exit he was consulting also, whether consciously or unconsciously, the highest interest of his art." But, after all, what have these polemics to do with Henry James's place in letters, his exquisite art, his unique genius? He found the English novel a chaotic thing, largely devoted to good works, to moral intents, to propaganda of all kinds; loose, voluminous, formless as a deflated balloon. He made of it a supreme art, governed like all art by definite laws of its own, by ordinances self-denying and difficult, and under these stern conditions depicting nothing less than life itself. Historically his epoch, his manifestation, definitely divides the art of fiction into all those who were before him and all those who follow after; of these last, such great figures as Conrad and Proust have freely attested their debt to him.

An anonymous critic, writing at the time of the posthumous appearance of *The Ivory Tower*, thus summed up his accomplishment:—"We see more clearly than ever that there was a whole field of human experience which he was the first, perhaps, to note and explore—certainly the first to appropriate to artistic uses. This wide field, this dusky realm, of which he gradually made himself king and master, lies all about us, although we usually turn our eyes from it, and is nothing else than the circumambient mystery

in which we all live, the complexity of life and of every incident in it, the subtlety and uncertainty of all human relations when we regard them closely. . . We understand at last his dramatic principle of grouping and arrangement; what he calls his 'law of successive aspects, each treated from its own centre'; and how, by the manipulation of these aspects, these mirrors and reflecting glasses, he prepares his planned effect, slowly and surely making some poignant impression of beauty, or pathos, or terror glimmer and loom and grow upon us, the embodied whole swimming into our ken like a great glimmering orb, dusky and refulgent, with yet at the centre of its illumination a crystal clearness. In fine, we see in these documents the good old, homely, go-as-you-please English novel transformed into a work of high and conscious art, with a technique beyond that of the subtlest French masters."

What, it may be asked again, will be the verdict of posterity? Henry James himself had this to say about Jane Austen:—"Practically overlooked for thirty or forty years after her death, she perhaps really stands there for us as the prettiest example of that rectification of estimate, brought about by some slow clearance of stupidity, the half-century or so is capable of working round to."