Review Articles

HENRY JAMES'S JOURNEY FROM THE INTERIOR

T. E. Flynn

Professor Peter Buitenhuis's purpose in *The Grasping Imagination* is to vindicate Henry James's imaginative fidelity to his native land, his persistent and eventually successful effort to seize and dramatically render the essential spirit of American civilization, through a close examination of the development of James's moral and social imagination in the light of those of his works which deal specifically with the American scene. It is Professor Buitenhuis's contention that James found an indispensable key to the comprehension of human reality in certain schemata or paradigmatic modes of artistic perception which he derived largely from literary sources. James's tardiness in coming directly to grips with what was central to the experience of his countrymen lay, according to Dr. Buitenhuis, not so much in its failure to engage deeply his interest as in his protracted inability to discover schemata appropriate to its peculiar quality and orientation.

The first thing to be said of *The Grasping Imagination* is that it is a highly readable, richly informative and often remarkably perceptive account of James's more explicitly "American" works which combines practical criticism of a generally high order with an admirably thorough investigation of the provenience of those recurrent themes out of which James wove the complex web of his later fictions. It is especially valuable for its account of the manner in which James's solution to the representational problems posed by the conditions peculiar to American life were affected by his wide and intensive reading in the contemporary English and European novel and it provides what is on the whole an admirable guide to anyone interested in tracing the strategic obliquities through which James triumphed over what in the American experience was most recalcitrant to the natural bent of his mind and imagination. These virtues are especially evident in Professor Buitenhuis's essay on *The Ivory Tower*, where, in his demonstration of the extraordinary depth and subtlety of James's insight into the manifold contradictions and dubieties of consciousness fostered by late nineteenth-century capitalism, he makes, by implication, his most persuasive case for James against those critics who would dismiss him as a deracinated fantasist whose long self-exile from his native land was but a kind of physical correlative of a neurotic flight from reality itself.

What is less satisfactory is Professor Buitenhuis's attempt to explain the evolution of James's later representational techniques in terms of E. H. Gombrich's account of the part played by received visual schemata in that process of "matching and making" through which the painter defines his wholly unique response to ex-

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ternal reality. Though James, in common with every other novelist, freely drew upon conventional literary formulae in defining his own vision, the great novels and stories of his major phase are clearly the product of something other than merely a virtuoso's adroitness in manipulating such formulae. This Professor Buitenhuis himself tacitly admits by rather lamely concluding, at a crucial point in his argument, that James finally succeeded in imaginatively appropriating the American experience through inventing his own schemata. But to admit so much is to discard the Gombrichean method, since the basic assumption of this method is the essentially derivative and impersonal nature of their perceptual patterns through which even the most original artist achieves the rendering of his personal vision. When, indeed, it comes down to a practical application of Gombrich's technique of formal analysis, Professor Buitenhuis's approach betrays not so much an indebtedness to Gombrich's theory of visual schemata as to Northrop Frye's theory of the intrinsically dynamic function of basic literary modes, and it would have served his purpose better if he had freely surrendered to the influence which the latter has so evidently exerted upon his view of the relation of form to vision in the process of literary creation.

What, in fact, Professor Buitenhuis's own account of James's development suggests is that the schemata which govern the works of his major phase are philosophical and psychological rather than literary. James, it is important to remember, was the brother of one of the foremost psychologists and philosophers of his day and the devoted son of one of the most original religious thinkers of the nineteenth century, and what he brought to his reading of contemporary fiction was a mind and a sensibility profoundly conditioned by this family penchant for philosophic speculation. James, even in the novels of his middle period, betrays a tendency to reject a traditionally essentialist view of character and identity in favour of a radically relational view, a tendency which bears a certain correspondence to the course taken by the more specifically psychological and philosophical researches of his brother William, and it is this which marks his fundamental deviation from the art of fiction as it was practised by his Victorian predecessors and contemporaries. The more sophisticated of the latter, though they saw character as a continuous organic process, presupposed the existence of an essential self in whose actualization or disclosure this process found its proper end. What is common to the representational techniques of such writers as George Eliot, Meredith and even Hardy is very largely determined by this notion of an ideal or occluded self struggling, whether successfully or unsuccessfully, to realize the constitutive inner law of its own being. As early as *Portrait of a Lady*, which foreshadows in its purely technical aspect the elaborately perspectival method of its author's later works, this essentialist conception of human nature shows signs of giving way to a more strictly phenomenalist approach to the question of self-identity, a modification of James's view of the ontological basis of personality which was perhaps a delayed response to the liberating

shock of Pater's aesthetic subjectivism. The fact that Osmond represents a warning to those who would take Pater's doctrine of aesthetic hedonism too literally is but an indication of how deeply Pater had stirred James's moral imagination.

James's implicit rejection of this two-dimensional conception of human nature in his later work was part of a more general reaction against the Victorian *Weltanschauung* of which the Aesthetic Movement, with its principled superficiality, its insistence upon art for art's sake, style for style's sake and appearance for appearance's sake, was something like a programmatic expression. The eighties and nineties mark the inner exhaustion of an impulse which, near the end of the previous century, had given rise to romantic naturalism and idealism. Fundamental to this impulse, which found its most definitive philosophical formulation in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, was a tendency to emphasize the immanence of the deity at the expense of his transcendence, to seek out the Absolute not in a realm of being external to nature but in the very organic processes of nature itself. Nature was but the vesture of God, the Absolute in its tangible and dynamic aspect, and man, as the child of Nature, was a privileged seat of the godhead—privileged, because it was through him that Nature came to self-awareness and the Absolute openly declared its presence in space and time. Hegel's view of the human subject as a contrite and broken consciousness, a typically nineteenth-century synthesis of Evangelical crisis theology and romantic idealism, provides a model for the conception of human nature which determines the internal logic, the imaginative response to emotional, moral and social experience, of the English novel from Dickens to Meredith. Even Hardy, who Darwinized the Absolute and its subjective manifestation, the ideal or essential self, as the Immanent Will, betrays a lingering and troubled attachment to this conception. The individual, under the stress of an obscure disquietude of spirit to which he can attach neither a cause nor a name, is riven by the conflicting claims upon his moral allegiance by a false or empirical self and a true or ideal self. The former binds him to a wholly externalized world of immediate sensations, relative values, fixed forms and arbitrary conventions, whereas the latter functions as a kind of interior surrogate of the Absolute through whose silent promptings the voice of universal Nature makes itself heard. In the surrender of his empirical self to his ideal self, the individual discovers the possibility of self-integration and self-transcendence and awakens to a dawning sense of his own essential divinity. The novel in which this quasi-Christian, quasi-romantic process of spiritual self-appropriation finds its consummate expression is George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. George Eliot, whom James admired for her psychological penetration and philosophic depth, showed him the new and difficult way he had to follow through the very brilliance with which she gave conclusive imaginative expression to a mode of apprehending human reality which, as the century drew to its close, the sophisticated literary intelligence found it increasingly difficult to entertain as a live option.

This post-romantic interiorization of God and deification of man was carried to its logical extreme in Feuerbach, whose *Essence of Christianity* George Eliot translated. God is but the reification, the imaginative projection into an imaginary heaven, of man's sense of his own unrealized possibilities for total self-fulfillment. Feuerbach's exposure of the anthropocentric basis of nineteenth-century idealism was eagerly seized upon by Marx who, in turning Hegel on his head, in redefining the nature of man solely in terms of the material conditions of his existence, forced home the fact that idealism, whether religious or philosophical, was, even in its most tenuously humanistic forms, a spent force. The first volume of *Capital* was dedicated to Darwin, and Darwinism with its scientific vision of nature red in tooth and claw and its no less dismaying revelation of what lay within the instinctual depths of human nature was a decisive factor in precipitating that deflation of the high spiritual value attached to the natural, the organic and the spontaneous, that dissipation of the Victorian reverence for depth, of which Aestheticism no less than Naturalism was the literary expression. Aestheticism and Naturalism were but different aspects or dialetical complements of the same reactive tendency, a tendency that was not so much anti-idealistic as a necessary response to the growing spiritual vacuum left by idealism's internal collapse. That a Huysmans, the creator of Des Esseintes and the biographer of St. Lydwine of Scheidam, should have begun his literary career as a disciple of Zola is not as strange as it might appear. In spite of its natural authenticity, the ideal self of the early nineteenth-century transcendentalists existed only as a hope and a possibility, whereas the empirical self, in spite of its relative falseness, existed as an actuality—a paradox or contradiction of which both the Aesthetes and the Naturalists took full advantage in their common repudiation of the traditionally two-dimensional conception of human nature. Naturalist and Aesthete were at one in their implicit affirmation of the "truth" or ontological primacy of the empirical self and in their inclination to dismiss the ideal self as a sentimental fiction, a fatuous bourgeois illusion fabricated out of what Kierkegaard had described as the spiritual dregs of a bankrupt Christendom. Earlier in the century, the Victorian sages had wept openly and unashamedly over the demise of that bourgeois apotheosis of the Ideal, the heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In the eighties Oscar Wilde, speaking for his own generation, declared that "only a man with a heart of stone could refrain from bursting out laughing on reading of the death of Little Nell". As for the deity in the spectral image of whose fading transcendence the ideal self of the Victorians had been fashioned, he was either rejected outright or acknowledged as a presence qualitatively distinct from both nature and man, a "wholly Other" to whom one could in some confidence submit but with whom one could not collaborate. For those Aesthetes who retained a taste for absolutes, as for their patron saint Baudelaire, the choice lay between an uncompromisingly nihilistic atheism and Jansenistic Catholicism—a form of traditional Christianity whose formalistic, anti-naturalistic and anti-humanistic bias pre-

cluded any attempt of the self to seek within its own non-existent spiritual depths an illusory refuge from the radical precariousness of the human condition.

James fully shared the aesthete's sense of the terrible depthlessness of human nature, and his cult of consciousness as the ultimate though non-transcendent source of all human or relative values was an attempt to mediate the extremes of nihilism and a strictly theocentric transcendentalism without arbitrarily disallowing the claims of either. Though he retained the idealistic schemata of the Victorian novel as a kind of protective formal carapace beneath which his moral imagination could negotiate with some measure of artistic assurance the abyss opened in the European consciousness by the withdrawal of the Absolute, he was as acutely sensitive to its hollowness as the most despairingly nihilistic of his contemporaries. Milly Theale, for instance, is but a hyper-sophisticated version of the ideal to which Dickens had given naive expression in Nell—a version of it, however, as R. P. Blackmur points out, which is in the highest degree problematic and even sinister. Perhaps the closest James ever came to a direct expression of the sinister hollowness, the menacing possibilities of spiritual vertigo, which this ideal contained and concealed, is in his elaborate description of the mysterious pagoda around which the mind of the heroine of *The Golden Bowl* creeps with such fearful fascination, with such a dreadful anticipation of lost innocence and lost security.

For James, as for Kierkegaard, whose anthropology is in a number of important respects strikingly similar to that expounded in the theological and philosophical works of Henry James, Sr., the thought of the radical mutability of human nature is, as Kierkegaard puts it, "terrifying, all fear and trembling", something that induces a metaphysicial shudder. In such later novels as *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* the inward identity of the characters, once they have been shaken loose by choice or by circumstance from the stabilizing influence of their traditionally sanctioned codes of received values, whether American of European, bourgeois or aristocratic, is reduced to hardly anything more than the precarious sum or focus of their ceaselessly shifting relations to others. The awakening of the Jamesian subject to its state of dreadful inner contingency results in a hectic and tormenting restlessness of spirit which seeks a reconstituted sense of moral identity in the loving and solicitous regard, the unwavering emotional fidelity, of an other. Though the guise which this desperate yearning ordinarily assumes in James's novels is erotic, it is basically an ontological passion. Since the human object towards which it is directed is itself an intrinsically mutable, inconstant and spiritually unfocused creature, it is doomed to at least partial frustration—which accounts for the recurrence of what Graham Greene calls "the Judas complex" in James's work. Because it is an infinite yearning, a desire for the ideal and the absolute which has attached itself to a finite object, the latter is more often than not as much victim as victimizer. Emotional vampirism becomes a subject of almost obsessive interest for James in his later work. The moral universe of the later

James is one in which the Berkleian axiom, *esse est percipi*, is given a tragically sardonic twist—a universe in which the subject is overwhelmed by something like a metaphysical terror in its sense that the sustaining regard of the other is being distracted by a rival who craves the ontological support of the beloved with a passion equal to its own. Even the suspicion of the withdrawal of the beloved's regard is enough to plunge the lover back into the vertiginous abyss, the terrible aching void, that it harbours within the innermost depths of its radically disorientated consciousness.

James's interest in exploring the socio-ethical and cultural implications of this state of acute emotional insecurity was in all probability prompted by first-hand accounts or even direct experience of those "vastations" described so feelingly by his father and brother. These chronic attacks of extreme spiritual dereliction appear to have been a common topic of conversation within the James family circle and figure prominently in the attempts of both Henry, Sr., and William to formulate a satisfactory philosophical and psychological rationale for the religious impulse. In order to grasp and render this condition of spirit in its essential inwardness, James was obliged to develop an almost wholly new technique of perspectival representation, a technique which implied, as its philosophical schemata, a highly complex conception of the dynamics of consciousness in which the perceptual faculties assumed both a distinct ethical value and an ontological function somewhat similar to that assigned to them in Berkleian idealism. The basis for such a schemata he found in the philosophy of consciousness elaborated by his father, a curious compound of neo-Calvinist theology, Swedenborgian mysticism, transcendentalist metaphysics and Fourierist utopianism which could only have come out of the peculiar moral and intellectual climate of mid-nineteenth century America and which impressed his more famous sons as the work of a genuine if highly idiosyncratic religious genius. What lies behind the novels of James's major phase is a purely phenomenological version of the metaphysical and quasi-religious theory of the genesis and structure of consciousness expounded by his father—that is to say, the reduction of the latter's theory to a form acceptable to the essentially agnostic and pragmatic cast of mind and appropriate to the strictly artistic interests of his son.

Henry James, Sr., though he admired Emerson, criticized him for the total absence from his thought of a sense of the reality of evil, something of which James, through his traumatically direct experience of what his son William called "the pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life", was only too keenly aware. What James's own highly eclectic philosophy came down to was an attempt to accommodate the neo-romantic idealism of the New England transcendentalists with this vastatory sense of man's radical insecurity—an awareness of the power and ubiquity of evil which, as a matter of fact, had been central to the Puritan consciousness of New England until well into the nineteenth century. For James, man's deepest need is to achieve, through the intensive cultivation of consciousness at all its levels and in

all its forms, a sense of his own true selfhood. To seek this essential selfhood within the depths of one's own nature, as the idealists of the romantic enlightenment seemed to advocate, was to court despair, since what these depths revealed, under the apocalyptic shock of the vastation, was a dreadful emptiness of spirit. The Absolute, the redemptive life-enhancing and creative source of all value, lay not, therefore, within or behind consciousness, but was itself sheer consciousness. For Swedenborg, from whom James borrowed the term, the "vastation" though accompanied by a well-nigh intolerable spiritual anguish was, however, primarily a purgative experience, something which, as James came to see it, cleared the way for the eventual emergence of a mode of apprehending reality infinitely more responsive, durable and authentic than that which it had so brutally dissipated. Indeed, what James's rather obscure account of this process suggests is that the evolution of consciousness to ever higher, finer and more comprehensive forms owes its impetus to man's unremitting efforts to contain and control that elemental nothingness, that active principle of negation, which lies at the core of his being. Though humanity owes its social no less than its spiritual progress to the struggle of consciousness to wring form out of the aboriginally formless, it is the artist rather than the reformer who most nearly embodies this ideal of the wholly free and triumphant consciousness. The elder James's conception of the social function and value of the aesthetic impulse is in fact remarkably similar to that of Wilde in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism.*

It is impossible to fathom the "true" motives, the ultimate springs of decision and action, of the characters of James's later novels because the consciousness of these characters is not represented as having unplumbed depths that the reader, with the assistance of the author, is invited to explore, but as an intensely agitated surface vainly seeking a stabilizing centre external to itself. Strictly speaking, the conventional distinction between surface and depth, appearance and reality, authentic and inauthentic states of mind does not obtain in the moral world of the later James, although a shadow of this two-dimensional view of man persists in an implicit contrast between personalities which have ossified into a closed system of habitual response to experience and those which, at the cost of a terrible and sometimes intolerable strain upon their emotional resources, remain open to the ceaselessly changing demands of experience. In other words, what determines value in James's moral world is vivacity and flexibility of response to life—complexity rather than depth of character. The hypothetical absolute or state of redemption towards which his heroes or, as is more often the case, his heroines yearn is an integrity of personality which they seek in the unwavering, unifying regard of an Other—an Other whose office in the emotional, moral and spiritual ordering of their lives is much the same as that of the centre of consciousness in a Jamesian novel.

This sense of the terrible fluidity to which the self is subject accounts for James's almost obsessive concern for pattern in his novels, his tendency to locate

his characters in social settings in which the feeling for sharp class distinctions is still strong, and his mandarin-like attention to minutiae of good form—characteristics which he shares with Proust, a novelist whose philosophic impulse most nearly resembles his own. In his preoccupation with the contrast presented to the discerning eye between the restless vortex which constitutes the unmediated reality of consciousness and the artificial rigidities of form and gesture through and around which this vital current eddies and swirls, James's version of human existence was not unlike that formulated by Bergson, a thinker much admired by his brother William. It is not surprising that this Bergsonian view of existence, which for James was something to shudder at rather than to exult over, should have issued in a growing existence upon the importance of sheerly formal values in art and an intensifying distaste for every manifestation of formlessness in the socio-political sphere. In this he anticipates the doctrinaire neo-formalism of the generation that succeeded his own, the aesthetic and political stance of such Anglo-Saxon proponents of the Conservative Revolution as T. E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot, whose hostility to the bourgeois-progressive cultural, social and moral order was, at the philosophical level, a direct reaction to the Bergsonian insistence upon the ontological priority of time, process and change in every sphere of human existence. The so-called anti-novel of our own day, with its rejection of psychology and its conception of consciousness as merely a translucent medium, a kind of chemically pure psychic fluid, through which the objects and relations that constitute our experience manifest the enigmatic givenness of their sheer presence, also has its forerunners in the later works of James, who, however, has never been equalled in the power with which he expresses the metaphysical terror which such an appallingly arid and antiseptic vision of reality can induce.

The philosophic schema which James fashioned out of the work of his father, along with the representational method in which it found artistic issue, lent him a key to the American experience which, so it seemed to him near the end of his life and career, but illustrated on a collective scale and in a nakedly brutal fashion that corrosive inner restlessness which he saw as lying at the root of so much emotional and spiritual anguish. His social vision, as it began to broaden and sharpen in the works of the middle and late periods, was that of a kind of Tory Marxist. American society, as he saw it reconstitute itself in the wake of the Civil War, found its most dynamic and characteristic expression in the activities of the businessman, in an unbridled assertion of the acquisitive instinct prompted by an endemic restlessness of spirit which had dissolved all traditional sanctions and involved itself in internal contradictions which could only be resolved by the negation of the very democratic, egalitarian and individualistic values and ideals which had originally fostered it. That James, as an American, was not altogether unsympathetic towards this impulse in its more sublimated forms is indicated by his rendering of such characters as Isabel Archer, Milly Theale and Maggy Verver, who, in their idealistic

fashion, are as agitated by the elemental restlessness of the American spirit as their more narrowly acquisitive and aggressively materialistic masculine compatriots back in the United States. James was all the more willing to return to the American scene in his last days because, in the course of his long sojourn in England, it had become increasingly clear to him that European society, beneath its mellow, gracious and faded aristocratic veneer, had become as susceptible to the restless avidity of the acquisitive impulse, as morally vulnerable to the forces released by finance capitalism, as his homeland in the aftermath of the Civil War. In other words, he seems to have decided that he might just as well turn his attention to a society dominated by the spirit of Betterton and Gaw as keep it fixed upon one dominated by that of Mrs. Lowder, "the Britannia of the Market Place", the former being only a more direct, authentic and energetic aspect of the latter.

Motives of a more intimately personal nature also caused James to return, with a belated though passionate urgency, to the challenge of the American experience. In finally coming to terms with what he saw as the driving force of American civilization, its epic impulse towards material aggrandizement, he sought to come to terms with his own ancestral origins. *The Jolly Corner* which was written shortly after his last visit to the United States, is, among other things, a grimly sardonic tribute to the shade of that mighty, terrible and profoundly alien progenitor, the black Irish peasant immigrant from County Cavan, who had established the American sept of the James clan. As James well knew, it was his grandfather's ruthless acquisitive drive and native political acumen which laid the solid cash foundations for those conditions of contemplative leisure which allowed his unworldly son and his famous grandsons to cultivate the life of the spirit, the mind and the imagination. The spectral alter-ego that Spenser Brydon, the expatriate aesthete, encounters in the deserted house of his fathers is, though mutilated and ravaged by life, a presence of overwhelming vitality for whom Bryden's neglected muse, Alice Staverton, is not ashamed to confess her respect and even her love. One regrets that Professor Buitenhuis, with his fine instinct for the manner in which James yields the deepest secrets of his art in dealing with the American experience, did not devote more attention to this, the most quintessentially American of all his works. A less pertinacious attachment to his rather narrow literary conception of schemata would perhaps have saved him from his comparative neglect of a story which is central to an understanding of the American roots of James's moral and social imagination.

It would, however, be grossly unfair to Professor Buitenhuis to overemphasize the extent to which his generally excellent study of James is vitiated by his misapplication of the Gombrichean schemata—a piece of critical ordnance which, in any case, he tends to wheel dutifully into position for purely parade purposes only at the end of each of his admirable analyses. James has, on the whole, been very fortunate in his critics, and not least so in Professor Buitenhuis.