

stool. So nationalization is inescapable. But how to make this efficient? Many men will do their best just for the sake of making a good job. Many, but not, I think, most. If you don't put a carrot in front of a donkey's nose, you must use a stick. If you don't offer profit, can you manage without an Ogpu?

I regard the return of the Labour Government as a crowning mercy: all the more painful therefore the temptations to Cobdenism with which the Air Ministry so persistently assails my virtue.

*(To be concluded)*

## MERVYN JONES-EVANS

# HENRY JAMES'S YEAR IN FRANCE

In the autumn of 1875 Henry James, aged thirty-two, arrived in Paris. It was by no means his first visit to Europe, for several years of his childhood and adolescence had been spent outside America, but this was his first visit as a writer. It was to be an important event in his life and he had already a premonition of its value. On previous visits he had only too readily laid himself open to absorb European traditions and culture, so his feeling for the past was well developed. In America there was nothing to assuage his thirst and he hankered after the Europe which he was convinced had more to offer him than Boston or New York. What is more, he had come to the turning point of his life: a decision had to be made and it was one that he could make easily. He knew that there was no alternative, that it was only in literature that he could find any sense of fulfilment, and so, looking for a spring-board from which to take the plunge, he turned towards Europe.

Europe was the centre of intellectual and literary activity, and therefore it was inevitable that sooner or later James must migrate there to free himself from the deadening, cloying, sterile puritanism of New English life. After an uneventful year at Cambridge, Massachusetts, he set out in search of the congenial surroundings he needed and the intellectual company he so ardently desired. He arrived as a self-styled apprentice to sit at the feet of his chosen French masters and to learn from them the true meaning of art

and the intrinsic value of the written word. He wanted to see at first hand how their minds worked and in what direction they were tending. Above all, he wanted to become part of that splendid circle of writers who represented for him the only live force in contemporary literature and the only movement with which he felt any affinity. He was the right age; for ten years already his life had been devoted to the profession of literature and he had to his credit a number of reviews and critical articles, several stories, and one novel, *Roderick Hudson*, which, at the time of his arrival, was being serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

James took rooms at 29 rue de Luxembourg, intending that Paris should become his home. He found his way easily into society for he possessed breeding, culture and a certain amount of wealth. In addition, he spoke impeccable if somewhat old-fashioned French and, most useful of all, he was an American. It was far easier for an American to pass through the barred doors of London or Paris society than it was for a young Englishman or Frenchman. Henry James knew this and took full advantage of his opportunities to gain *entrée* to literary and artistic salons such as those run by Madame Viardot and Madame de Blocqueville. It was through these evenings, and some readily accepted invitations to dinner parties, that he managed to meet his literary idols, and came to know Gustave Flaubert, Alphonse Daudet, Maupassant, Zola, Edmond de Goncourt and, for James the most important, Ivan Turgenev. He wrote from Paris: 'I have been seeing something of Daudet, Goncourt, Zola; and there is nothing more interesting to me now than the effort and the experiment of their little group, with its truly infernal intelligence of art, form, manner—its intense artistic life. They do the only kind of work, today, that I respect; and in spite of their handling of unclean things, they are at least serious and honest. The floods of tepid soap and water which under the name of novels are being vomited forth in England, seem to me, by contrast, to do little honour to our race.'

In April of the following year he wrote to his father: 'You crave chiefly news, I suppose, about Ivan Sergeitch [Turgenev], whom I have lately seen several times. I spent a couple of hours with him at his room, some time since, and I have seen him otherwise at Mme. Viardot's. The latter invited me to her musical parties (Thursdays) and to her Sundays *en famille*. I have been to

a couple of the former and (as yet only) one of the latter . . . Her Sundays seem rather dingy and calculated to remind one of Concord "historical games", etc. But it was both strange and sweet to see poor Turgenev acting charades of the most extravagant description, dressed out in old shawls and masks, etc.' And further on he wrote the often-quoted extract: 'I had the other day a very pleasant call upon Flaubert, whom I like personally more and more each time I see him. But I think I easily—more than easily—see all around him intellectually. There is something wonderfully simple, honest, kindly, and touchingly inarticulate about him.'

Half a year had already passed when he wrote that letter, and there is already, to the observant eye, a shade of doubt. To obtain a word or two from Turgenev meant long and boring evening recitals at Madame Viardot's. Flaubert was difficult to see owing to his monastic way of life—his 'Benedictine existence' James called it—and although he was on terms of amity with Daudet and Edmond de Goncourt, there was no feeling of friendship or warmth with any of them. He found them all members of a closed circle, not open to outside opinions and influences, and, least of all, prepared to accept an unknown, reserved, perhaps rather pompous, American. So, more often than not, he was thrown back with undoubted chagrin and disappointment upon the not altogether pleasing company of his own compatriots in Paris. Whether they filled the gap satisfactorily we cannot tell; certainly he made full use of them in later years.

It is difficult to discover what really happened during that experimental year, for his own letters say little and his name is absent from the French writers' letters, journals and memoirs. Turgenev, however, did write to W. R. S. Ralston telling him to make a friend of Henry James and describing him as 'a very amiable, sensible, and gifted man, with a tendency towards *tristesse* which will not frighten you'. Turgenev paid more attention to the young Henry James than any of the others, and in return he received all James's affection and admiration. Perhaps James found the circle too close; perhaps he was snubbed or received some rebuff; whatever may have occurred James battled on in Paris, filling his brain with literature and painting, with every detail of the city, of the people, and of Parisian society, all of which he was to use later on. He wrote Parisian letters for

the New York journals and reviews and gave himself up to everything that France and her Capital had to offer him. That he was proud is obvious, and even if his reception was less enthusiastic than he had hoped and anticipated, he was determined to make up for it in other ways. At least those in America who were not altogether sympathetic to expatriate tendencies must not be allowed to suspect his failure. In May 1876 he wrote to W. D. Howells (another New England novelist, but one who never left America and who, in later years, was somewhat critical of James's preference for living in Europe) that he was 'turning into an old, and very contented Parisian: I feel as if I had struck roots in the Parisian soil, and were likely to let them grow tangled and tenacious there'. But later in the same letter some of the truth began to emerge, for he admits: 'I have seen a certain number of people all winter who have helped me to pass the time, but I have formed but one or two relations of permanent value, and which I desire to perpetuate. I have seen almost nothing of the literary fraternity, and there are fifty reasons why I should not become intimate with them. I don't like their wares, and they don't like any others; and besides they are not *accueillants*. Turgenev is worth the whole heap of them, and yet he himself swallows them down in a manner which excites my extreme wonder.' Yet he goes on to say: 'I interrupted this a couple of hours since to go out and pay a visit to Gustave Flaubert, it being his time of receiving, and his last Sunday in Paris, and I owe him a farewell. *He* is a very nice old fellow, and the most interesting man and the strongest artist in his circle. I had him for an hour alone, and then came in his "following", talking much of Zola's catastrophe—Zola having just had a serial novel [*L'Assommoir*] interrupted on account of protests from provincial subscribers against its indecency. The opinion apparently was that it was a bore, and that it could only do the book good on its appearance as a volume . . . . On my way down I met poor Zola climbing the staircase, looking very pale and sombre, and I saluted him with a flourish natural to a contributor who has just been invited to make his novel last longer yet . . .'

No doubt part of the trouble was that although he had a considerable admiration for their fearless innovations and experiments, their respect for language and form, and their passion for style—characteristics common to all the Realist

writers—he was revolted by their subjects. One of the reasons why he left America, and New England in particular, was the inhibiting and stifling atmosphere of puritanism. But in Paris he discovered the horrible truth: that he himself was equally puritanical and had just as pronounced a sense of morality. Again and again the reader of his reviews and critical essays will find him protesting against what he considers to be indecency. Another distressing factor was that he was unable to persuade the French writers either to read or to listen to him enthusing over George Eliot, who occupied second place in James's estimation of the greatest contemporary novelists—the first being Ivan Turgenev. He found the parochialism of the French writers exasperating and never failed to say so in his reports to America. In every respect it seems that their circle was a closed one.

In July he wrote to his brother from Étretat, where he had spent the summer months, '... my last layers of resistance to a long encroaching weariness and satiety with the French mind and its utterances have fallen from me like a garment. I have done with 'em, forever, and am turning English all over. I desire only to feed on English minds—I wish greatly I knew some. Easy and smooth-flowing as life is in Paris, I would throw it over tomorrow for an even small chance to plant myself for a while in England.' The inevitable disappointment had to be admitted. His disillusionment was complete, and it was plain to him that his experiment was a failure: indeed it would be to most young men at that particular stage of development. But, little as we know of the actual happenings of that year in Paris, it was clearly an invaluable experience. Even if he had been shocked by Flaubert's opening his door to him clad only in his dressing gown, he was compensated by an occasional hour in Turgenev's 'little green sitting-room' at Madame Viardot's.

Some of his disappointment can be read in the collection of essays which appeared in 1879 under the title *French Poets and Novelists*. These include, amongst others, critical comments on Musset, Gautier, Baudelaire, Balzac, George Sand, and a joint essay on Charles de Bernard and Flaubert, since Henry James did not deem Flaubert worthy of an article devoted entirely to himself. It is only fair to explain that these essays are not so much literary criticism as a list of James's likes and dislikes; for James (to invert his oft-repeated complaint against the French

novelists) was not so much interested in the truth about life as in the truth about art. And therefore the reader should not consider this book as a particular example of Henry James's criticism but simply as another sidelight on the development of his mind and thought.

In *French Poets and Novelists* it is Flaubert who suffers most. For James has singled him out as the one most affected by what he considers their greatest literary weakness—indecenty. As he wrote from Paris, 'novel and drama alike portray an incredibly superficial perception of the moral side of life. It is not only that adultery is their theme, but that the treatment of it is so monstrously vicious and arid!' This was, of course, a reference to *Madame Bovary* (the novel which pained him most) and to Edmond de Goncourt's *La Fille Elisa*. Again and again he emphasizes this point. 'Everything ran to form, and the successful books were apt to resemble little vases, skilfully moulded and chiselled, into which unclean things had been dropped.' And then: 'French literature abounds in books which have been pushed to the lengths which only a sort of artistic conspiracy of many minds could have reached . . .' Zola too came in for censure: 'Zola is the most thorough-going of the little band of out-and-out realists. Unfortunately the real for him means exclusively the unclean.' This attitude is perhaps a little surprising when one remembers that Henry James himself, in a very different way (perhaps unintentional) is not altogether free of suggestive writing. As Mr. Edmund Wilson has pointed out, *The Turn of the Screw* is filled with submerged sexual symbolism.

Everything was wrong with *Madame Bovary*. It lacked delicacy, charm and 'good taste', qualities which he particularly admired in the early novels of George Sand and (despite a certain vulgarity) in Pierre Loti's *Pêcheurs d'Islande*. Worse still, it lacked reserve, a quality which he especially understood and enjoyed in both Balzac and Turgenev and which was very much to his nineteenth-century New English taste. This feeling for the delicate handling of moral questions had also aroused his admiration for George Eliot (whom he was to meet the following year in London), and it was a quality which he ardently cultivated in his own writing. James preferred respectability to bohemianism and had a very definite code as to what was and what was not permissible in art, life and literature. Flaubert had observed none of the

fundamentals of this code. Of *Madame Bovary* James wrote: 'The accumulation of detail is so immense, the vividness of portraiture of people, of places, of time and hours, is so poignant and convincing, that one is dragged into the very current and tissue of the story; the reader himself seems to have lived in it all, more than any other novel he can recall. At the end the intensity of illusion becomes horrible; overwhelmed with disgust and pity he closes the book.' Yet *Madame Bovary* appealed to him more than the other novels of Flaubert, which he felt to be cold, hard, steely, uninspired and calculated literary exercises. As he wrote in the second of his three essays on Flaubert, '*Salammbô*, in which we breathe the air of pure aesthetics, is as hard as stone; *L'Education*, for the same reason, is as cold as death; *Saint-Antoine* is a medley of wonderful bristling metals and polished agates, and the drollery of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (a work as sad as something perverse and puerile done for a wager) about as contagious as the smile of a keeper showing you through the ward of a madhouse'. At least *Madame Bovary* was coloured by a warmth of emotion, which took off the icy chill and made it more palatable. James felt that Flaubert had sacrificed his imagination, his emotions and even his life to his almost fruitless search for the perfect form, and that in the end it was only an 'immense ado about nothing'. In later years his criticism was less harsh and he even modified his opinion of *Madame Bovary*. Yet he always spoke of 'poor Flaubert', and described him as a great failure in art. For, despite his more lenient opinion, *Madame Bovary* always remained the beautifully worked out but indecent book which had won notoriety through the publicity of a court-room.

Baudelaire he found even less attractive, for the reason that he never really understood him. He completely misconstrued the title *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and talked of the poems as being full of 'rags and bad smells, lurid landscape and unclean furniture'. Although he admitted that Baudelaire possessed a certain talent and some vein of genius he dismissed him as 'childish'. After all, hadn't Hawthorne done it better?

So it was with most of the nineteenth-century French authors whom he read and met. Even his 'adored' Balzac did not escape unscathed, for James was horrified by his preoccupation with money and a little amazed by his obsession with the aristocracy. In spite of his respect and adoration he strongly criticized what



he termed Balzac's 'arrant charlatanism' and went on to say that 'It is probable that no equally vigorous mind was ever at pains to concoct such elaborate messes of folly. They spread themselves over page after page, in a close, dense, verbal tissue, which the reader scans in vain for some little flower of available truth.'

However, no matter what charges he laid at their door, the French novelists were closer than any others to his own particular conception of what contemporary literature should be. And while his personal relations with them were unsuccessful he had at least been able to see and talk to them. He could still respect their craftsmanship, their technical achievements and their pursuit of perfection. He could still, even if his experiment at living a literary life in Paris had also failed, benefit from their consciousness, their awareness and their very definite sense of vitality.

Henry James was not altogether to blame for his lack of success. Even had he been able to reconcile himself to the French way of thinking it is far from certain that he would have been accepted by the French writers, as is proved by the almost parallel experience of George Moore. Moore's acquaintanceship with Zola—no matter how it may have appeared to him in retrospect—was clearly slight. But whereas James kept silent about his failure, George Moore deliberately tried to obfuscate the facts. Yet in some respects he fared better than James, for he did meet Hugo, Mallarmé (he was invited to the Tuesday evenings), and the Impressionist painters, Manet, Degas, Renoir, and others. But he knew them no better than James knew Flaubert or Turgenev.

Before his year's stay was up James knew that it would be impossible for him to go on living in Paris and he began to consider a move to London. He excluded America as an alternative. London would, and did, prove more fruitful. Whatever the real reason for his decision, he had no intention of renouncing his meagre connections with France or French literature. His interest in all its latest developments was paramount, and even as an old man his curiosity was just as keen, for in 1914 he wrote to Edith Wharton asking her to send him Marcel Proust's *Du Côté de Chez Swann*. Perhaps he actually read the early volumes of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*; his opinion would have been unusually interesting, for stylistically he had much in common with Proust. Two-thirds of his literary criticism was devoted to French literature, and although he had but little appreciation of poetry



(he had a predilection for the works of Browning) it is significant that the only poetry he wrote about was that of Musset, Gautier and Baudelaire.

All through his life he made repeated visits to Paris and there were always friends with whom he kept in contact: One such was Alphonse Daudet, whose *Port Tarascon* he translated and published in 1903, another was Jacques-Emile Blanche. To the very end he had a lively, and not altogether typically American, interest in the latest manifestations of French culture. One visit to Touraine and Provence produced the travel book *A Little Tour in France*, and France provided the setting for several of his novels, among them *The Ambassadors*, *The American*, and the first part of *The Tragic Muse*.

But what he particularly derived from his sojourn in Paris was a sense of analysis. This essentially French faculty, which played such an important role throughout his work, enabled him to lead the novel into a channel hitherto completely unknown and to produce those fascinating prefaces to the collected edition of his works which are something unique in Anglo-Saxon literature. No matter what his feelings may have suffered during that year, it is quite obvious that it was in Paris in 1875 and 1876 that James learnt the craftsmanship of writing and the fundamentals of his art; it was there indeed that he discovered 'the figure in the carpet'. It is also obvious that had he not gone to Paris he would have missed an invaluable experience which greatly contributed to his own genius.

## SELECTED NOTICES

### NEW NOVELS

*Auto Da Fé*. By Elias Canetti. Jonathan Cape. 15s.

*Prater Violet*. Christopher Isherwood. Methuen. 5s.

*Auto Da Fé*. Leading Viennese critics consider this work one of the great novels of the century. Certainly it is a book one will not forget. Four hundred and sixty-four pages. With its voluminous incidents and all its meticulous detail it is immensely—but immensely—long. We do not get far without grasping that the author is a formidable pessimist. If there are any qualities in man which could make him attractive, or even passably tolerable—we do not get a glimpse of them here. (Except in the case it is true of one character who turns up at the end, brother to the hero—but then even he lives in order to be considered charming, one is given to understand.)