

## THE INSTITUTION OF HENRY JAMES

*THE QUESTION OF HENRY JAMES*, edited by F. W. Dupee  
(Allan Wingate, 18/-).

This is a very welcome edition of an American book that appeared a year or two ago, an anthology of critical articles on Henry James collected from periodicals and of chapters culled from books. Perhaps it is not so well done as it might have been—its interest is less intrinsic than historical. We are given as a start an essay of 1879 ('Henry James, Jr.'), a fine specimen of complacent provincialism, and can see the various phases of James's reputation to date and the evolution of a serious critical approach to his art. In 1898, we are told, he was virtually unknown in America. In 1918 Mr. Eliot began his memorial notice '... James will probably continue to be regarded as the extraordinarily clever but negligible curiosity'. Whereas in 1943 Mr. William Troy ends his essay '... no great wonder that more and more people are turning to Henry James'. Between the nadir of '98 and the zenith of the last decade journalistic criticism exposes itself more shamefully than over any other great writer. In 1912 intellectual brilliance was represented by Sir Max Beerbohm's 'parody',<sup>1</sup> reprinted from *A Christmas Garland*—this is the period when the idiosyncrasies of James's late style stuck in the public throat and any journalist could get a laugh by making gestures of crude intention behind James's back. The viciousness of such a 'parody' lies in its endorsing the vulgar account of James as unreadable, unprofitable and preposterous. Mr. Dupee regrets that Wells's attack (in *Boon*, 1915) could not be reprinted too; contemporary with Beerbohm's piece, this illustrates the malice that the successful writers of the Wells-Bennett-Maugham era felt for the novelist who had devoted his life to his art, exercising incredible industry with no material reward (unless we reckon the O.M. bestowed on his death-bed). On top of this he had to face vulgar unprovoked attacks in his old age by journalists like Wells. He minded deeply. No one can read unmoved his letters to Wells about *Boon*. [Mr. Percy Lubbock comments with desolating fatuity, in his notes to *The Letters of Henry James*, 'H.J. was always inclined to be impatient of the art of parody']. The letters to Howells in 1888 and '95, to Howard Sturgis in '99, and to Gosse just before his death about the failure of the collected edition of

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<sup>1</sup>This alone should suffice to explode the 'incomparable Max' myth—an ideal of elegant triviality, the cult of which is historically explicable as a result of Oscar Wilde's impact on Oxford and the higher journalism; though Oxford, King's College Cambridge, and their Bloomsbury affiliations appear to be still culturally in the Wilde phase, the rest of England isn't, and 'Max' should have been politely pigeon-holed long ago instead of being sponsored by the B.B.C. as the G.O.M. of English letters.

works, show the impressive courage and dignity that James had developed to sustain him against the kind of treatment noted above.<sup>2</sup>

We see here how very different is the tone of pieces of the same period by Eliot and Conrad (and Pound, whose notices of 1918 were reprinted with later criticism in *Make It New*, and might very profitably have been drawn upon by Mr. Dupee). It is encouraging to see that those creative writers who were also literary critics, as distinct from journalists and academics and social men of letters, were all along able to respond to James at his own level of seriousness. Conrad, for instance, in 1905, is here seen to have jumped the whole historical process with his note on James as 'The Historian of Fine Consciences'. Similarly, Pound in *The Little Review*, 1918, could see that 'there was titanic volume, weight, in the masses he set in opposition within his work . . . His art was great art as opposed to over-elaborate or over-refined art by virtue of the major conflicts which he portrays'. At the same date Mr. Eliot was writing 'The real hero, in any of James's stories, is a social entity of which men and women are constituents . . . He is the most intelligent man of his generation'.

Conversely, the journalists are still where they were—all the phases of criticism of James that you find in this anthology are now simultaneously present in layers. The 1904 essay, 'In Darkest James', is just the kind of bright journalism you might find in the literary weeklies to-day; or Mr. Van Wyck Brooks, who is shown in 1925 damning James because his characters are not true to (the man-in-the-street's impression of) life and because Brooks cannot comprehend their motives—how often we still meet that. In 1927 Mr.

<sup>2</sup>'I have felt, for a long time past, that I have fallen upon evil days—every sign or symbol of one's being in the least *wanted*, anywhere or by anyone, having so utterly failed' (1895).

'I greatly applaud the tact with which you tell me that scarce a human being will understand a word, or an intention, or an artistic element or glimmer of any sort, of my book. I tell *myself*—and the "reviews"—tell me—such truths in much cruder fashion. But it's an old, old story—and if I "minded" now as much as I once did, I should be well beneath the sod' (1899).

'I remain at my age (which you know [72]), and after my long career, utterly, insurmountably, unsaleable . . . The edition is from that point of view really a monument (like Ozymandias) which has never had the least intelligent critical justice done it—or any sort of critical attention at all paid it—and the artistic problem involved in my scheme was a deep and exquisite one' (1915).

His closest friend, Edith Wharton, noted 'his sensitiveness to criticism or comment of any sort' and explains that it 'had nothing to do with vanity; it was caused by the great artist's deep consciousness of his powers, combined with a bitter, a life-long disappointment at his lack of popular recognition'. *A Backward Glance*.

Pelham Edgar, in what is unfortunately a standard work but really a monument of misunderstanding, shows that he has missed the whole point of James's studies of the International situation (p. 141, f.). We can feel that criticism has at any rate progressed if we compare the chapter from *The Method of Henry James* (1918) by Joseph Warren Beach, the pioneer critic of James's 'art', with the best work in the same field in recent years. Beach makes painstakingly one point after another about 'method', without ever seeming to get anywhere or to make the only kind of criticism that matters, that which adds to our ability to read the work: he does not understand the author's intention, he is not an interpreter. Nowadays, at the top level, critics of James, as Mr. Dupee says in his Introduction, 'discourage any reading that takes a part of his effect for the whole'.

Everyone will be glad to have Mr. Eliot's hitherto inaccessible pieces on James. Popularly, Mr. Eliot's contribution to James criticism has been limited to the famous sentence, now thirty years old, 'He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it', which has been a battle-ground ever since. Some said it means nothing, others that it supported their representation of James as an aesthete, and others that it is demonstrably untrue, since James's mind was in fact the prey of his father's eccentric system of ideas, to illustrate which Junior composed his novels. Now we can read the sentence in its context, where it seems to have been thrown out as an exasperated attempt to distinguish James from the Merediths and Chestertons who cluttered the foreground of literature at the time. The essay dates, and contains many odd judgments (e.g., 'Henry was not a literary critic'—who that has read even James's essay on Baudelaire in *French Poets and Novelists* would not demur?). It nevertheless puts its stresses in the right places; one I have already quoted, the other is contained in his title, 'The Hawthorne Aspect'.

The essay of 1917 on 'The Aesthetic Idealism of Henry James' introduces a familiar note: James's art is identified with Pater's. And wherever aestheticism is still prevalent, poor James is thus misconceived. The hangover from the 'Nineties represented by Mr. Cyril Connolly is still at the stage of seeing in James's prose no more than a Paterian surface:

' . . . the dialect of Pater, Proust and Henry James, the style that is common to mandarin academic circles given over to clique life and introspection. This dead literary English, with its long sentences, elaborate similes and clever epithets . . . ' (Introduction to *The Rock Pool*).

James's late style (for he developed several styles in the course of his very long career though the journalists seem not to have observed this elementary fact), ridiculous to a 'Max' and elegantly decadent to a Connolly, is now felt by serious readers to be, like his other idiosyncrasies, a language we have learnt to take for granted—once we are at home in it it presents no difficulty but is felt to be as effective an instrument, and one as informed with life, as the

language of Hopkins or Shakespeare. The serious, the vicious aspect of this assimilation of James to Proust and Pater is that James is assumed to have, like them, replaced moral values by aesthetic ones, to be, as one critic in this book accuses him of being, 'ugly with the absence of moral energy and action'. That it refutes this falsification of James's work is the value of the criticism that puts James back into his place in the New England tradition. While there is a good deal collected by Mr. Dupee of purely American interest—contributed by those for whom the Question of Henry James was whether his art is American and therefore sound, or un-American and therefore decadent—even that has its point for the rest of us because it shows in sum, very convincingly, that, as the editor says, 'James turns out to be a continuator of the severe ethics of New England'. Unfortunately there is no extract from Mr. Yvor Winters' book on the influence of the New England ethos on American literature, *Maule's Curse* (1938), where the chapter devoted to James, called 'The Relation of Morals to Manners', still seems to me the best treatment of the subject. Another way of showing James's American roots is the essay here by Constance Rourke on 'The American', taken from her pioneer work *American Humour* (1931), where she made a study of the American folk-lore that fertilised American literature.

After aestheticism, the hard-boiled 'twenties, cock-sure and shallow, are seen 'placing' James. Then was produced the formula that explained away his art as a purely mental production of the jig-saw order of achievement. The distinction of *locus classicus* is perhaps to be claimed for Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925)—the passage is not reprinted here but echoed in more than one place:

'Certainly it is a serious charge against much of Henry James, for example, that when the reader has once successfully read it there is nothing further which he can do. He can only repeat his reading. There is often a point at which the parts of the experience click together, the required attitude is achieved, and no further development is possible'.

This was evidently a bright idea being handed round by frequenters of the smart literary circles. Gide must have picked it up there:

' . . . nothing really alive nourishes him, and James extracts only from his brain what he knows to be there, and what his intelligence alone has put there . . . The skilfully made network spun out by his intelligence captivates only the intelligence . . . James, in himself, is not interesting; he is only intelligent . . . all his characters are like the figures of a clock, and the story is finished when they have struck the curfew . . . ' ('From an unsent letter to Charles Du Bos', American publication, 1930).

There is no sign in his 'letter', reprinted here, that M. Gide has read anything of James whatever (Connolly has the grace to admit in *The Condemned Playground* that he could never manage to get

through James's books). Evidently this kind of judgment was a formula for dismissing a novelist for whom such people could have no use, whom they could not make the effort to comprehend, and to whom they felt impelled to display superiority. Mr. Matthiessen's mind seems also to have been formed in the Ricardian 'twenties: 'James's novels', he tells us here, in the essay on *The Ambassadors* from his recent book (reviewed in *Scrutiny*, Spring, 1947), 'are strictly novels of intelligence rather than full consciousness'. But even an academic nowadays breathes a livelier critical air than of old, and another way of proving that criticism achieves something is to compare the results of Matthiessen's industry with those of the Lubbocks and Pelham Edgars of the past.

This brings us to the day before yesterday. Yesterday saw the reversal of Mr. Matthiessen's dictum that in James's novels 'there is none of the welling up of the darkly subconscious life that has characterized the novel since Freud'. Mr. Edmund Wilson and Mr. Stephen Spender find James's works a Freudian field-day. Of course every great writer is reinterpreted in the light of contemporary interests (and fashions), but how sound the more recent presentations of James will look tomorrow is still to be decided. Thus when Mr. Spender finds that 'the monologues [of *The Golden Bowl*] dip into an abyss where they become part of the unconscious mind of Europe', and that 'His technical mastery has the perfection of frightful balance and frightful tension: beneath the stretched-out compositions there are abysses of despair and disbelief: *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*' (1936)—one may well raise an eyebrow. Mr. Wilson, writing at the same date but keeping closer to the texts, has a surer poise. One may not agree with his interpretations, and in point of fact his account of *The Turn of the Screw* (as an hallucination of the neurotic governess who is narrator) has, I seem to remember, been shown not to hold water by several critics.<sup>3</sup> But when he proceeds to build up a theory of an ambiguity in presentation by James very generally, he is certainly drawing attention to a feature of James's work that most people, preferring to simplify, find it convenient to overlook, and which culminates in his valuable point that 'the element of irony in Henry James is often under-estimated by his readers'. Mr. Wilson's criticism is tough as opposed to the 'aesthetic' apprehensions of Mr. Matthiessen, but, being alive and disinterested, he succeeds in infusing a new sense of reality into James's works whereas the other's kind of attention seems to empty James's art of significance. Mr. Wilson puts substance behind his final claim that James 'is in no respect second-rate, and he can be judged only in the company of the greatest'.

As for the criticism of to-day, represented here by Mr. William Troy's 'The Altar of Henry James' (1943), it seems to have been fertilised by the new school of Shakespearean criticism that followed

<sup>3</sup>The latest is Mr. Robert Liddell in *A Treatise on the Novel* (Cape, 9/6).

on *The Wheel of Fire*. To see in a great part of James's novels and stories a body of work of the same nature as Shakespeare's is at least less misleading than to judge them as Victorian prose fictions which aim at imitating a social surface. While the novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with few exceptions, were descended from Addison and Defoe, with some admixture of a debased stage comedy, there is quite another kind of novel, created by Emily Brontë, Melville, Conrad and Henry James, among others, which makes use of the technique of the dramatic poem. If Mr. Troy seems to be laying too much stress on James's symbols, he has to correct a long tradition of crass insensitiveness to the whole intention of James's art. 'It is clear enough' he writes, 'that to the present generation James means something more than to the generation of Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford or to the addled and intolerant generation of the 'thirties. Also clear is that what he means is something different'. 'As in any authentic artist', he continues, 'the "meaning" in James is contained in the total arrangement and order of his symbols, and in the novel everything—people, events, and settings—are capable of being invested with symbolic value'. Excellent as is his theory, he does not seem to me to carry it out in the right way; he makes no such convincing and illuminating analyses as Mr. Quentin Anderson in the essay on Henry James that appeared in *The Kenyon Review* for Autumn, 1946. The weakness of the study of symbols is that the text tends to get less attention, instead of a fresh concentration of attention. Nevertheless, elementary and uncertain as is Mr. Troy's handling of James's 'symbols', one can see how fruitful the approach might be. To recognize in James's novels and *nouvelles* art of the same nature as *Measure for Measure*, to see that they are in a tradition of mediæval and Elizabethan drama transmitted through Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and Bunyan (and so Hawthorne), is to make their meaning accessible, as it never can be if they are approached on the assumption that they are the same kind of thing as the writings of Trollope and Thackeray. This is to put James's work on a plane where the highest claims can be convincingly made for it.

The editor prints also Mr. Auden's poem *At the Grave of Henry James*, presumably as an illustration of the Snob cult of James. Mr. Zabel's contribution, 'The Poetics of Henry James' (1935), subscribes, in so far as it says anything, to the general conspiracy to find James's Prefaces profoundly illuminating, but fails to produce any paraphrasable explanation of why they should be held to be so. Mr. Jacques Barzun's essay, 'Henry James, Melodramatist' (1943), an attempt to show that romantic and violent drama is a basic element in James's writings, has some point inasmuch as it takes the wind out of the sails of those who would dismiss James as 'the last refinement of the genteel tradition' (as in an essay reprinted by Mr. Dupee on 'Henry James and the Nostalgia of Culture', 1930). But the superficiality of his thesis is apparent once he applies it to a specific work—*Washington Square*, which he interprets as crudely melodramatic:



'And its force is derived from the essentially melodramatic situation of a motherless daughter victimized by a subservient aunt and a selfish father—a being for whom the melodramatic epithet of "fiend in human form" is no longer sayable but still just'.

This is to misrepresent James entirely and to do blatant injustice to the American *Eugénie Grandet*. James's triumph lies in doing without Balzac's sentimentality about the *jeune fille* and in creating an infinitely subtler situation than Mr. Barzun credits him with presenting. The father is not a villain—James takes pains to secure sympathy and respect for him, it is significant that he is linked with the 'Republican simplicity' of the ethos of old New York, and he is introduced to us as 'a thoroughly honest man'. The suffering is shown to be on both sides, a tragedy of the relations between an exceptionally brilliant father and a commonplace but worthy daughter. The two are bound by natural affection, but the clever father, his history being what it is, can take only an ironic tone with his dull and inarticulate child. In the one crisis of her life this acts as an insuperable barrier between them. There is complete mutual misunderstanding, symbolised by the icy waste among the mountains, with night descending on them, where they find themselves at odds so painfully, in a memorable scene. He alienates her confidence while doing his best for her welfare, and though the fortune-hunting lover 'had trifled with her affections', it was her father who 'had broken its spring'. It is the father's tragedy too, for he has destroyed his only natural link with life. To ignore the complexity of a distinguished work of art like *Washington Square* and to assert instead that it is something crude and commonplace is to impoverish James's creation. That is the result of concocting a theory about a writer's work and then making a text square with it.

It is the distinction of the essay of Mr. R. P. Blackmur's here, 'In the Country of the Blue' (1943), that it starts with the texts—James's tales about artists—and extracts a theory from them. Noting James's fondness for the theme of 'the artist in conflict with society' and making the point that 'the artist is only a special case of the man', Blackmur concludes: 'James made the theme of the artist a focus for the ultimate theme of human integrity'. It was James's own experience as an artist—the letters I quoted above are evidence—that qualified him to feel this struggle from the inside. Typically he dramatizes it in the choice between being a Henry St. George, the Master who has succumbed to the temptations of a Philistine society and ruined himself as a novelist, and being a Paul Overt—or a Nick Dormer (in *The Tragic Muse*) or a Ray Limbert (in *The Next Time*), or a Neil Paraday (in *The Death of the Lion*)—a kind of ascetic, saint and martyr. But why, while admitting Conrad's accomplishment as novelist, did James complain to Ford Madox Ford that Conrad's works left a very disagreeable impression on him? Was it that Conrad rubs in so intolerably the inescapable isolation of every man?

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## RECENT LITERARY CRITICISM IN GERMAN

*DIE FREIEN RHYTHMEN IN DER DEUTSCHEN LYRIK*,  
A. Closs (A. Francke A. G. Verlag, Bern).

Just as the German philosopher has perhaps been prone to expound his theories without much reference to the common experiences of human life (not only a German failing, since recent European philosophy has declared it a virtue, even an aim), so the German critic has often been apt to develop his aesthetic without due reference to actual poetic examples. In a new Swiss publication, *Die freien Rhythmen in der deutschen Lyrik*, however, the author, Dr. August Closs, keeps close down to his subject by incorporating extensive quotation into his work and, more important, by confining himself to a consideration of the words on the page and their arrangement within the poem, *i.e.*, rhythm. The book has a restrained discussion of the difference between metre and rhythm and between poetry and prose, an account of the beginnings of free verse, and separate chapters on a number of important German poets since Klopstock. The dangers inherent in the 'scholarly approach' are avoided: 'Metrisches Mass, Reimlänge und Zeilenanordnung haben keinen absoluten Wert'. Rhythm cannot be isolated in a line taken out of its context for it is something that happens between the first word and the last: we are concerned with the whole work ('das ganze Kunstwerk'). 'Der Rhythmus macht im Innersten das aus, was so oft als Gehalt *und* Form bezeichnet wird. Er ist das letzte, endgültige Kennzeichen, der Herzschlag eines Gedichtes'.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Closs maintains critical standards: interesting though Klopstock is as the pioneer who supplied the model of the Ode, no attempt is made to conceal the fact that he cannot be ranked with Goethe and Hölderlin, who brought the more important ingredient—poetic genius. Historical importance of this kind can easily be established by educing a few dates, and Dr. Closs devotes his energies to such excellent pieces of practical criticism as those dealing with *Wanderers Sturmlied* and *Wie wenn am Feiertage* and in the relating of Hölderlin's 'dreistufige Aufbau' to his myth-trinity (*Erde, Äther, Licht*) and to his 'evolutionary' triad, 'Urzustand, Kindheit—Heroenzit, Kampf—Sittenideal, Einheit von Antike und Christentum und All-Liebe'.

The chapter on Hölderlin is exceptionally valuable. By placing it immediately after several pages of Goethean text (including *Wanderers Sturmlied*, *Ganymed*, *Prometheus*)—and not far from

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<sup>1</sup> 'Rhythm constitutes, in its innermost form, that which so often is denoted as Form *and* Content. It is the final, authentic token, the heartbeat of a poem'.