

in the United States. When *The Hound and Horn*, the former highbrow review of Harvard, produced a number in honour of James, though it is true some of it was not very inspired criticism, yet I distinctly remember that the only really offensive contribution was by our Mr. Stephen Spender. And Mr. Garnett does not exactly deserve a bouquet from James's admirers for his present effort.

Q. D. LEAVIS.

THE APPRECIATION OF HENRY JAMES

HENRY JAMES: THE MAJOR PHASE, by F. O. Matthiessen
(Oxford University Press, 9/6).

I start with the last section of *Henry James: The Major Phase* by way of assuring genuine admirers of James that Mr. Matthiessen's book shouldn't go unhandled. The section is called 'The Painter's Sponge and Varnish Bottle', and it is devoted to illustrating in some detail how James improved *The Portrait of a Lady* in revising it. For in revising he does, for the most part, improve, much as one might have expected the contrary of any systematic meddling by the late James with the work of his early prime. We are not encouraged when the critic tells us that the 'writer's equivalent for the single flake of pigment is the single word', but the actual instances of revision given us are extremely interesting. We see James working happily for a vividder concreteness, a higher specificity, greater colloquial freedom and livelier point. Instead of 'their multifarious colloquies' he writes 'their plunge . . . into the deeps of talk'. Osmond in the first version 'hesitated a moment'; in the revised he 'just hung fire'. The Countess Germini, who originally 'cried . . . with a laugh', in the revision 'piped', which defines her idiosyncrasy more sharply, and, as Mr. Matthiessen well puts it, condenses her sound and manner into one word. And here is another good instance: 'Originally Ralph had concluded, "Henrietta, however, is fragrant—Henrietta is decidedly fragrant!" This became a punch line: "Henrietta does smell of the future—it almost knocks one down!"' This leads us to a very significant kind of change in which the radical preoccupations implicit in James's sensibility assert themselves and his positives take on explicitness:

Ralph's "delights of observation" become "joys of contemplation". Warburton's sisters' "want of vivacity" is sharpened to "want of play of mind", just as Isabel's "fine freedom of composition" becomes "free play of intelligence" . . . It is equally characteristic that Isabel's "feelings" become her "consciousness", and that her "absorbing happiness" in her first impressions of England becomes "her fine, full consciousness". She no longer feels that she is "being entertained" by Osmond's conversation; rather she has "what always gave her a very private thrill, the consciousness of a new relation"'.

This section of Mr. Matthiessen's book, however, is offered only as a loosely attached appendix; it doesn't really belong. For *The Portrait of a Lady* doesn't belong to what he assumes to be James's 'Major Phase'. I say 'assumes', because I can't see that he does anything more critical than take over the conventional view that the great James is the late James—the James of *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* ('his three major novels'). In the conventional way he reinforces his reliance on the unanimity of fashion with an appeal to James himself:

'I agree with James' own estimate that *The Portrait of a Lady* was his first masterpiece, but that thirty years later he began to do work of a greater depth and richness than any he had approached before. My understanding of his development has been increased by the rare opportunity of reading through the hundred and fifty thousand words of his unpublished working note-books, which, extending from 1878 to 1914, concentrate most heavily on his aims and ambitions during the crucial period of the eighteen-nineties'.

This last sentence gives us Mr. Matthiessen's offer. He does with the note-books, however, nothing to give his offer substance; nothing that can be said to forward understanding of James's development or to justify the claim made for them. In fact, his use of them amounts to little more than a show, under cover of with some relaxed ruminations about the late novels have the air of being a serious contribution to criticism. Even if the note-books had contained more illumination than any we can divine from Mr. Matthiessen's exemplifying, he would, to have brought them into enlightening relation to James's art, have had to be the active critic he doesn't show himself to be.

He relies, I have said, so much on convention as to feel absolved from attempting to base his assumed valuations in criticism: the 'Major Phase' of his title remains an unargued postulate. The inertness of this reliance is made the more oddly apparent by his showing that he knows of strictures that have been passed on the works of the late period. I think this will be judged a fair way of putting it, since, though he formulates them as coming from himself, they make no difference to his attitude. He doesn't appear to realize their force as criticism, but rests quite unembarrassed on his *donnée*: the Major Phase is the Major Phase. When I myself in these pages criticized *The Golden Bowl* in terms that Mr. Matthiessen may be said to summarize my conclusion was that *The Golden Bowl* is not a great novel, and that still seems to me the inevitable conclusion.

So with *The Ambassadors*: Mr. Matthiessen concedes enough to dispose of that book as either a major creation or a successful work of art when (p. 37) he corroborates my own judgment that James utterly fails to justify the essential imputations of value that are involved in the offered theme of Strether's awakening to

Life. True, we are given arguments for nevertheless persisting in a high estimate of the book.

'What gives this novel the stamina to survive the dated flavour of Strether's liberation is the quality that James admired most in Turgeneff, the ability to endow some of his characters with such vitality that they seem to take the plot into their own hands, or rather, to continue to live beyond its exigencies. The centre of that vitality here is the character not reckoned with in James's initial outline. For what pervades the final passages is Strether's unacknowledged love for Madame de Vionnet. James has succeeded in making her so attractive that, quite apart from the rigid requirement of his structure, there can really be no question of Strether's caring deeply for any other woman. The means that James used to evoke her whole way of life is a supreme instance of how he went about to give concrete embodiment to his values'

The argument—one associates it with a familiar notion of criticizing fiction—itself is of a kind to promote mistrust; and it seems to me that the facts of the given case make it glaringly absurd here. If Madame de Vionnet is the centre of vitality, that doesn't say much for the book; for in my judgment she illustrates notably the characteristic weaknesses of the late James. The fussy subtleties and indirections of her presentment signal a lack of grasp, and a preoccupation with justifying an imputed value that, to a live sense of reality (such, indeed, as James's late manner can hardly be said to challenge with any insistence), appears ridiculous and sentimental. That a Strether's valuation of a Madame de Vionnet should be of the order that Mr. Matthiessen defines for himself—one wouldn't mind that if only one hadn't to identify Strether as valuer with James, who asks us to see him and his predicament as invested with the dignity and weight of tragic irony. For the lady to be accepted by us as so miraculously transcending the familiar type and ethos, James would have had to do something more creative and convincing than the transmutation by atmospheric vagueness and Impressionist æstheticizing that he attempts.

Such indeed is the ineffectiveness of his art and his general feebleness in *The Ambassadors* as to suggest senility—though one knows that the actual case is more interesting than that. (The peculiar thinness of the book is obviously related to the fact that he had, appropriately, intended to do the theme in a *nouvelle*; but, of course, we still have to ask why, in his late period, the substance of *nouvelles* should tend to be spun out by overtreatment into full-length Jamesian novels). Mr. Matthiessen singles out for praise the expeditionary force from Massachusetts:

'The portrait of the Pockocks—Sarah, Jim and Mamie—is one of James's triumphs in light-handed satire, in the manner he had mastered in *Daisy Miller* and had developed further, in that lesser-known but delightful jeu-d'esprit, *The Reverberator*'.

—When I myself cast back in the comparative way I can only wonder at the abject feebleness that, in the treatment of one of his most congenial themes, can overtake the hand of a master. It is one judgment, of course, against another; but, reverting to the crucial matter of Madame de Vionnet, I suggest that the presumption lies against the appraisal that, exalting a figure as tragically impressive, elaborates itself in this mode:

‘His [James’s] one living tap-root to the past was through his appreciation of such an exquisite product of tradition as Madame de Vionnet. Yet, as he created her, she was the very essence of the æsthetic sensibility of his own day. Strether can hardly find enough comparison for her splendour. Her head is like that on “an old precious medal of the Renaissance”. She is a “goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud”, or “a sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge”. She is so “various and multifold” that he hardly needs to mention Cleopatra. And though Mona Lisa is not mentioned, James is evoking something like Pater’s spell’, etc.

In the remaining novel of the ‘major’ trio Mr. Matthiessen judges James to have done even better:

Why it was that James could create women of much greater emotional substance than his men we can tell best by turning to *The Wings of the Dove*.

I agree that there is more strength in *The Wings of the Dove* than in the other two. It is to be found, I think, in the presentment of that squalid background to Kate Croy’s life which represents the pressure driving her into unscrupulousness and entitling her to some of our sympathy, and in the presentment of Mrs. Lowder (Aunt Maud), magnificent personification of Edwardian or late-Victorian vulgarity. But the book depends for success even more on the heroine, Milly Theale, than *The Ambassadors* does on Madame de Vionnet. And ‘substance’, it seems to me, is the last word to apply to Milly Theale. To my sense, she simply isn’t there: the effect on me is one of being directed, with endless iteration and insistence, to feel emotional intensities about a blank; it is an effect of elaborated, boring and embarrassing sentimentality. Mr. Matthiessen, on the other hand, judges that James created in Milly Theale ‘the most resonant symbol for what he had to say about humanity’. Again it is one judgment against another. And again, as presumptive evidence in favour of mine, I cite Mr. Matthiessen’s own appreciative commentary.

He says (p. 59) that ‘despite James’s past-masterly command over the details of realistic presentation, he is evoking essentially the mood of a fairy-tale’—which is an odd way (I quote from Mr. Matthiessen’s next sentence) of raising ‘his international theme to its ultimate potentiality’. He describes as a ‘spell’ the method by which James tries to invest Milly with significance: ‘James has

completed his spell and transformed his heroine into a Renaissance princess'. In so far as it works, 'spell' is certainly the appropriate word for it; for what positive qualities does James even attribute to this supremely symbolic paragon? She is fabulously wealthy, that is all—unless one adds that she is American. She isn't shown to us as especially intelligent, as representing any tradition, or as herself interesting. Simply, she is (we are to understand) a fabulously wealthy American heiress, and as such has a right to expect enormously and vaguely of life, to receive homage as a Princess, and, because she is a Princess (American) to be pitied as a supremely tragic figure when her expectations are brought up against the prospect of death. There is more to be said for Isabel Archer as a tragic heroine; she is 'there', invested with convincing positive qualities, though James overvalues her. But the only ground offered for seeing a more significant and interesting pathos in Milly's case than in that of any one else who expects enormously and vaguely of life is that she is an *American* heiress; the suggestion of significance and spiritual intensity is wholly a matter of the 'spell'. If this worked for anyone it would be a success of illusion, depending on a fairy-tale abeyance of the adult mind—a triumph of mere suggestion.

The reminder of James's devoted memories of Minnie Temple, the admired and idealized cousin who died young, has no critical bearing. It may help to explain why James should have been able to suppose that in sentimentalizing round a void he was defining a presence; but it doesn't make any difference to what we actually have. The weaknesses of that, as of the 'major' works in general, are obviously correlated with an over-developed technical pre-occupation; James, working at the problems he poses himself, fails to realize his themes sufficiently as life, with the result that he makes demands on us, for sympathy and evaluative response, that we can't satisfy. Mr. Quentin Anderson's recent essay in *The Kenyon Review* (Autumn, 1947), in which he argues with a great deal of force that James gives proof in his work of taking very seriously his father's system, leads one to suppose that a pre-occupation with symbolism may also have a good deal to do with the way in which, in framing his problems for himself, and handling his themes, he offends our sense of life and reality. But no amount of explaining how James came to do what he did makes what he did other than what we find it to be.

I hope I haven't appeared to suggest that I lump the three novels together as equal in unsuccess. It goes with what I call the conventionality of Mr. Matthiessen's approach that he does lump them together, failing to make the marked discrimination called for. *The Ambassadors* I judge to be an utter failure; it hasn't a theme capable of sustaining treatment at novel-length. In *The Wings of the Dove* the failure is at the centre of the conception, entailing what seem interminable dreary wastes; but the strong part is substantial and very impressive. It is good James that one remembers vividly and goes back to. *The Golden Bowl* has a

magnificent theme, and the genius of the author is magnificently apparent in the handling. It is in the central valuations that the book goes wrong.

It is my sense of James's greatness that makes me insist on my difference with Mr. Matthiessen about the novels of what he calls the 'Major Phase'. For his view is representative; at any rate, I hope it isn't offensive to say that accords with a convention that has prevailed since about the time when Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* was first acclaimed, if not longer. And until that convention is put out of countenance there can be no hope of getting for James's genius and achievement the recognition due to them. Let it be understood that, by the consensus of the best people, it is the late James that must be admired, and the late James will (with, say, Percy Lubbock's help) by many be admired—though it won't be James's genius they are admiring, nor will they be enlightened or exhilarated. Others will know they are bored, and some will conclude critically. The effect in any case is not to encourage the exploration of James, the vastness of whose *œuvre* must strike the conventionally initiated as peculiarly forbidding.

There is a betraying and unfortunate conventionality about the things, other than Mr. Matthiessen's 'major' three, that the *conoscenti* star. Why, for instance, should *The Aspern Papers* and *The Turn of the Screw* get such disproportionate attention? They aren't, after all, the superlative products of the master's genius that the distinction accorded them suggests; many finer stories are left for the explorer to find for himself. And there are the really bad things that, having once been tipped, go on being. There is, for instance, *The Altar of the Dead*. The favour it enjoys goes back at least to the fervent pæan of acclaim that will be found in Miss Rebecca West's little book. And now we find Mr. Matthiessen (p. 9) including it, in a routine way, among the recognized masterpieces. Yet it is a piece of sentimentality so maudlin and rank that an admirer of James, one would have thought, would rather not be reminded of its existence. (Mr. Matthiessen commends in the same sentence *Owen Wingrave*; yet if—being challenged—he looks at it again, can he deny that it is one of James's feebler things?)

On the other hand he can commit the injustice of this bracket: 'the strained virtuosity of *The Awkward Age* and *The Sacred Fount* . . . ' 'Strained virtuosity' is a kind phrase for *The Sacred Fount*, in which James doesn't even seem to know what he is trying to do, and the inexplicitnesses and ambiguities proliferate in a way that suggests a disease rather than a meaning. But, though one may concede that in *The Awkward Age* there is an excess of *doing*, nevertheless this is an almost incredibly brilliant work, about the intention and significance of which surely no genuine admirer of James can be in doubt (though, indeed, Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* describes it as a comedy). To be capable of backing the late period as 'major' and dismissing *The Awkward Age*—it

certainly strikes me as odd. That is the work I should pick on as exemplifying, along with *What Maisie Knew*, a distinctively 'late' James who triumphantly justified himself.

I have an impression that the critical writing of American academic intellectuals is on the whole decidedly more respectable than the corresponding English work, and I am disappointed not to be able to hail the book under review as a striking corroborative instance. Yet, at the cost of stressing the pejorative suggestion of 'academic', one can perhaps still find in the book a representative superiority. This is a point that one can't make at all forcefully without specifying an English case one has in mind. But everyone on this side of the Atlantic knows the type and could produce an example. There is that large display of familiarity with the latest thing in critical apparatus and idiom and fashion, and in the world of Culture generally; there is the absence in the book of any justifying purpose beyond the purpose of writing a book—of an impressively intellectual kind; and there are those disastrous give-aways, when, from time to time, the writer ventures too much on his own, or, in using his acquisitions, betrays patently that he is handling them from the outside, with no real understanding.

The book under review must be granted a marked superiority to the English product I have in mind. Yet in the opening paragraph of the Preface this meets us:

'The creative writers of my generation have recognized and assimilated his values. Auden and Spender, no matter how widely they have diverged from Eliot in politics and religion, have continued to agree with him that James is one of the few great masters of our modern literature. Practitioners of the novel who have taken its art seriously have long since responded to the high claims which Percy Lubbock made for James's technique in *The Craft of Fiction*. (1921)'.

This, at the outset, with its confident offer of values so betrayingly assorted, suggests fairly the relation between pretension and intellectual quality that characterizes the book. Eliot, Auden and Spender—one can only suppose Day Lewis left out (after all, he has given the Clark Lectures) because he hasn't pronounced on James. And can anything better than academic commentary come from a writer on James who thinks that *The Craft of Fiction* offers anything better than an academic substitute for criticism, or that any novelist taking his art seriously (unless an Academy novelist) has ever supposed his practice to have been affected by the book? But Mr. Matthiessen is right: *The Craft of Fiction* does enjoy a high reputation—which is a reason for being emphatic about the challenge.

The passage quoted above is representative. This, for instance, is how we are shown that the contemporaneity of James can be made out to be practically unlimited, so that Anglo-Catholics and Communists alike can rope him in:

'His intense spiritual awareness, drifting into a world without moorings, has told others beside Eliot that if religion is to persist, it must be based again in coherent dogma. At the opposite pole, our novelists of social protest can still learn much, as Robert Cantwell has incisively argued, from James's scale of values. His gradation of characters according to their degree of consciousness may be validly translated into terms of social consciousness, and thus serve as a measure in a more dynamic world than James ever conceived of'. (p. 151).

Yet there is, after all, a respect in which James is not altogether contemporary. In his novels

'there is none of the darkly sub-conscious life that has characterized the novel since Freud. James's novels are strictly novels of intelligence rather than of full consciousness . . . ' (p. 23).

—To attempt to define the distinctive selections and emphases that mark James's treatment of experience—that might be a valuable undertaking. But Mr. Matthiessen goes no further. He merely hands us the phrase, 'strictly novels of intelligence', as self-explanatory. In what sense are George Eliot's novels any less strictly 'novels of intelligence?' She, suffering too from the disadvantage of not having read Freud, is even less endowed (we gather) than James with the psychological resources that have enriched 'the novel since Freud':

'James occupies a curious border-line between the older psychologists like Hawthorne or George Eliot, whose concerns were primarily religious and ethical, and the post-Freudians'. (p. 93).

It would be as much to the point to tell us of Tolstoy by way of establishing his pre-Freudian limitations that his 'concerns were primarily religious and ethical'. George Eliot, even though a lesser genius, is Tolstoyan both in her insight into the obscurer workings of the psyche, and in the art that renders the insight. But the academic commonplaces about her (they are to be found in Lord David Cecil's *Early Victorian Novelists*) perpetuate a blindness to the nature of her greatness, so that it is possible to adduce her (alternatively to the very different Hawthorne—who himself hardly fits Mr. Matthiessen's intention) as representative of 'the older psychologists' who were ignorant of the darkly subconscious life'. (Mr. Matthiessen is welcome to his immediate point, that she doesn't deal with Lesbianism, as James, in *The Bostonians*, does—'without having to give it a name').

George Eliot was a peculiarly unlucky shot; but a critic, in any case, oughtn't to have been making such generalizations—and certainly oughtn't to have been giving Freud the place in literary history that Mr. Matthiessen gives him. The unconscious and the subconscious didn't wait for Freud to let them into literature, and there are other novelists besides Tolstoy and George Eliot from

whom this truth can be enforced. And Shakespeare—but Shakespeare, of course, didn't practise the novel.

I will close with a difference about a work of James's I admire very much, *Washington Square*. I should have said that it didn't present the least difficulty to the reader; but if Mr. Matthiessen is right in his account of it, then I in my reading have always been wrong:

'That book, despite its slightness, is so accurate in its human values that its omission from James's collected edition is the one most to be regretted. Those values are concentrated in the simple moral goodness of Catherine, in contrast to the cruel egotism of her father and the bare-faced venality of her suitor'. (p. 122).

I should have said that the whole point of the story depended upon the not obscurely presented datum that the father's ironic dryness covered something very different from 'cruel egotism'.

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ENGLISH CHAMBER MUSIC, by Ernest Meyer (*Lawrence and Wishart*, 30/-).

To my mind this is the most important book on music published since Reese's *Music in the Middle Ages* and Lang's *Music of Western Civilization*. In some ways it is, for English readers, even more significant than those two monumental works, for it deals specifically with our own musical tradition, and with an aspect of it that has been shamefully neglected. English musicology has to its discredit more than enough sins of omission, if not of incompetence. A vast amount of early Tudor and pre-Tudor manuscripts still awaits investigation; the great seventeenth-century school of instrumental composers is unpublished and unexplored, except for a few isolated fragments. And now it has taken a scholar of another nationality to write the first comprehensive study of this music.

The account of the idiom of Gibbons, Ferrabosco, Jenkins, William Lawes and the smaller men which Dr. Meyer offers, is a model of what technical analysis ought to be. He is not afraid to write in terms of the technique of music instead of talking around it; and his writing makes one eager to *hear* the works of which he is speaking. The copious musical examples and appendices contain music of a quality which amply bears out Dr. Meyer's high claims; one hopes that this book will encourage performance of the music (particularly the two big, exciting fantasias of Lawes); and that publication and recording of a selection of the works may follow.

Although Dr. Meyer writes about music in its own terms he never does merely that; he is interested in the technique as the medium in which human experience finds expression. Thus he has to consider too the social conditions that led to a given range