

## CORRESPONDENCE:

THE RELATION BETWEEN WILLIAM  
AND HENRY JAMES

Dear Sirs,

I do not raise the following point for the purpose of continuing the discussion on *The Turn of the Screw*. Both Mr. Leavis and myself have pretty fully defined our respective positions, and there is little to be gained by going on indefinitely offering interpretations and counter-interpretations of the details of the story. However, Mr. Leavis makes a remark in his reply to my rejoinder which provides an opportunity to introduce a new topic to which I think a good deal of interest attaches. It is solely in the interests of this further subject that I take the occasion now offered.

By 'excursion into chaos' Mr. Leavis says James only means 'the extreme freedom of improvisation that constitutes the trap or difficulty of the "fairytale" for a serious artist'. This 'freedom of improvisation' is, I agree, partly a freedom of technical improvisation. But I do not think James belonged with those Americans for whom technique 'pure and simple' was capable of becoming an end in itself. The emphasis on technique in James is usually accompanied by, and is, indeed, the very means by which he usually expresses, his moral interests. I think it goes without saying that Mr. Leavis would agree with such a statement, although he would make an exception of *The Turn of the Screw*: 'the story has no ponderable significance; it is a mere thriller'. In my discussion of *The Turn of the Screw* I was not primarily interested in James's freedom to improvise technically, although I think I did not neglect that aspect of the story. I was chiefly interested in James's freedom to improvise on the moral plane, which I did not see as ultimately separable from his technical freedom. This kind of 'extreme freedom of improvisation' seemed to me possible because James *apparently* conceived no inherent or overriding law as governing the terms of human existence. This kind of freedom of moral improvisation seems to me to constitute 'an excursion into chaos' in the sense in which I interpreted the phrase, and since such a freedom constitutes an intellectual and philosophical position, the story acquired in my own eyes a significance that was ponderable in that degree in which it revealed something about James's attitudes which might ultimately prove relevant to understanding his fictions as art. This story, taken with others which I discussed, seemed to suggest that for James the universe was pragmatically plastic, both for good and for evil. In that word 'pragmatic' I get to the real purpose of my present remarks.

Up to now there has seemed little opportunity of discussing the relationship between William and Henry James. To say that either has any direct influence on the work or thought of the other would

be a stronger statement than one might be able to substantiate. But each brother, in his own peculiar set of terms, represents a development frequently parallel with the other. What the origin of this similarity in their development is I am not concerned with here. But I think the tension between appearance and reality which I have discussed in James's novels becomes immediately intelligible from a different point of view when it is discussed in terms of his brother's pragmatism. Pragmatism really existed in America long before William James formulated it in an intellectual position. The whole historical situation conspired to make America into a nation of pragmatists, and all William James had to do was to take the temperature of the air around him and give it a name and definition. From the eighteenth century or earlier Americans had remodelled ancient European reality to meet their own needs, and their sense of having done so successfully left them with a great feeling of optimism about their ability to continue remodelling in the future. The norm by which they had lived was one of comfortable, and sometimes luxurious, expediency, and expediency had come, in their eyes, to be the good and true. Consequently, when William James formulated his pragmatic conception of truth, the definition was likely to be more satisfying than startling to the bulk of Americans:

'Grant an idea or belief to be true, what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash value in experiential terms? The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer. *True ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.* That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known as'.

Or even more pointedly:

'The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is made true by events: its *verity* is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*.

Henry James was wholly in sympathy with this pragmatic philosophy of his brother. In a letter to William James written from Lamb House on October 17, 1907, Henry James said:

'Why the devil I didn't write you after reading your *Pragmatism*—how I kept from it—I can't now explain save by the very fact of the spell itself (of interest and enthrallment) that the book cast upon me; I simply sank down, under it, into such depths of submission and assimilation that *any* reaction, very nearly, even that of acknowledgement, would have had almost

the taint of dissent or escape. Then I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have (like M. Jourdain) unconsciously pragmatized. You are immensely and universally *right*, and I have been absorbing a number more of your followings-up of the matter in the American (*Journal of Psychology?*) which your devouring devotee Manton Marble . . . plied, and always on invitation does ply, me with. I feel the reading of the book, at all events, to have been really the event of my summer'.

*The Golden Bowl* had appeared three years before James wrote this letter. The interpretation which I offered of *The Golden Bowl* demonstrates, I think, exactly what James meant when he said 'I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have . . . unconsciously pragmatized'. In Maggie Verver I think we have the greatest pragmatist in literature. She shows how truth can be constructed out of lies, and the verity of that truth 'is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself. . . .' This pragmatic base of James's art could be traced, I think, in a large number of short stories, although I only dealt with two, *The Liar* and *The Path of Duty*. It is this pragmatic bent in James, this 'extreme freedom of improvisation' in the world of human behaviour—this belief that there is no immutable reality behind appearances, but that appearances can always be twisted into new and convenient realities—which constitutes so much of Henry James's American flavour.

This 'extreme freedom of improvisation' as it exists in *The Turn of the Screw* amounts, I think, to a peculiarly perverse rendering of the doctrine of 'truth' which is discoverable in *The Golden Bowl*. It is the Credo of Pragmatism read backwards. It is easy enough to read the following quotation from the Preface to *The Turn of the Screw* as a reference *only* to the artistic, the technical process by which the story was created. But underneath that reference to an artistic process there is a profounder reference to a habit of thinking, a way of intellectual and spiritual life without which I do not think this story would have been successful. 'There is for such a case', James wrote in the Preface, 'no eligible *absolute* of the wrong; it remains relative to fifty other elements, a matter of appreciation, speculation, imagination—these things, moreover, quite exactly in the light of the spectator's, the critic's, the reader's experience'. There is no doubt that James is referring to the ingenious artistic solution here—but I believe such a solution would have occurred as a possibility *only* to a writer (and would certainly have been used successfully only by him) who was capable of approving William James's Pragmatism in such terms as were quoted above. In *The Golden Bowl* Maggie Verver constructs her Truth out of lies, but I believe that in *The Turn of the Screw* the Governess constructs her Evil out of Truth—the truth that resides in what I have contended is the innocence of the two children.

I said in my rejoinder that *The Turn of the Screw* contained possibilities that the American could respond to more readily than

other people. I could now phrase this more intelligibly, perhaps, by saying that *The Turn of the Screw* is ingeniously calculated to exploit, albeit in a perverse way, that native pragmatic bent which pre-eminently characterizes, above all others, the American sensibility. One value at least I hope will be conceded to my reading of *The Turn of the Screw*: Pragmatism is said to be the most amiable of philosophies, but I think my conception of the Governess may suggest that it is also capable of proving a very nasty spoonful of bitters indeed, a veritable 'excursion into chaos'.

MARIUS BEWLEY.

## COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

### ASPECTS OF MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

#### I.

Mr. B. Rajan's *Focus Number Five: Modern American Poetry*<sup>1</sup> ends with the answers given by a number of American poets to a questionnaire which he had sent them. The questions deal with American poetry, how it is to be distinguished from English poetry, whether its 'vocabulary, metric, cadences, syntax, punctuation differs notably from that of English poetry?' and so on. Such questions do not get one very far, and it is even possible that they may discourage one from going farther and asking more important questions. And yet such questions are not pointless either, for they lead into considerations of the relationship of the poet with his particular tradition. To quote from a non-contemporary work, *Gertrude of Wyoming*:

Delightful Wyoming! beneath thy skies  
The happy shepherd swains had nought to do  
But feed their flocks on green declivities  
Or skim perchance thy lake with light canoe.

One feels safe in assuming that an American poet did not write that, and the observation is not irrelevant. It is closely associated with an appreciation of the quality of the verse itself. But the question of what constitutes an American poet *can* be a red herring that leads us into considerations of the typical rather than of the essential and the unique. Nearly all the poets whose answers are recorded here are fully aware of this fact, but yet not very much of interest emerges from their collective answers.

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<sup>1</sup>Dennis Dobson Ltd., 8/6.