

Henry James at Work

THEODORA BOSANQUET

I

I KNEW nothing of Henry James beyond the revelation of his novels and tales before the summer of 1907. Then, as I sat in a top-floor office near Whitehall one August morning, compiling a very full index to the Report of the Royal Commission on Coast Erosion, my ears were struck by the astonishing sound of passages from *The Ambassadors* being dictated to a young typist. Neglecting my Blue-book, I turned round to watch the operator ticking off sentences which seemed to be at least as much of a surprise to her as they were to me. When my bewilderment had broken into a question, I learnt that Henry James was on the point of coming back from Italy, that he had asked to be provided with an amanuensis, and that the lady at the typewriter was making acquaintance with his style. Without any hopeful design of supplanting her, I lodged an immediate petition that I might be allowed the next opportunity of filling the post, supposing she should ever abandon it. I was told, to my amazement, that I need not wait. The established candidate was not enthusiastic about the prospect before her, was even genuinely relieved to look in another direction. If I set about practising typewriting on a Remington machine at once, I could be interviewed by Henry James as soon as he arrived in London. Within an hour I had begun work on the typewriter. By the time he was ready to interview me, I could tap out paragraphs of *The Ambassadors* at quite a fair speed.

He asked no questions at that interview about my speed on a typewriter or about anything else. The friend to whom he had applied for an amanuensis had told him that I was sufficiently the right young woman for his purpose and he relied on her word. He had, at the best, little hope of any young woman beyond docility. We sat in armchairs on either side of a fireless grate while we observed each other. I suppose he found me harmless and I know that I found him overwhelming. He was much more massive than I had expected, much broader and stouter and stronger. I remembered that someone had

Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?

Sign up now at storyoftheweek.loa.org to receive our weekly alert
so you won't miss a single story!

told me he used to be taken for a sea-captain when he wore a beard, but it was clear that now, with the beard shaved away, he would hardly have passed for, say, an admiral, in spite of the keen gray eyes set in a face burned to a colourable sea-faring brown by the Italian sun. No successful naval officer could have afforded to keep that sensitive mobile mouth. After the interview I wondered what kind of impression one might have gained from a chance encounter in some such observation cell as a railway carriage. Would it have been possible to fit him confidently into any single category? He had reacted with so much success against both the American accent and the English manner that he seemed only doubtfully Anglo-Saxon. He might perhaps have been some species of disguised cardinal, or even a Roman nobleman amusing himself by playing the part of a Sussex squire. The observer could at least have guessed that any part he chose to assume would be finely conceived and generously played, for his features were all cast in the classical mould of greatness. He might very well have been a merciful Cæsar or a benevolent Napoleon, and a painter who worked at his portrait a year or two later was excusably reminded of so many illustrious makers of history that he declared it to be a hard task to isolate the individual character of the model.

If the interview was overwhelming, it had none of the usual awkwardness of such curious conversations. Instead of critical angles and disconcerting silences, there were only benign curves and ample reassurances. There was encouraging gaiety in an expanse of bright check waistcoat. He invited me to ask any questions I liked, but I had none to ask. I wanted nothing but to be allowed to go to Rye and work his typewriter. He was prepared, however, with his statements and, once I was seated opposite to him, the strong, slow stream of his deliberate speech played over me without ceasing. He had it on his mind to tell me the conditions of life and labour at Rye, and he unburdened himself fully, with numberless amplifications and qualifications but without any real break. It would be a dull business, he warned me, and I should probably find Rye a dull place. He told me of rooms in Mermaid Street, "very simple, rustic and antique—but that is the case for everything near my house, and this particular little old house is very near mine,

and I know the good woman for kind and worthy and a convenient cook and in short——.” It was settled at once that I should take the rooms, that I should begin my duties in October.

II

Since winter was approaching, Henry James had begun to use a panelled, green-painted room on the upper floor of Lamb House for his work. It was known simply as the green room. It had many advantages as a winter workroom, for it was small enough to be easily warmed and a wide south window caught all the morning sunshine. The window overhung the smooth, green lawn, shaded in summer by a mulberry tree, surrounded by roses and enclosed behind a tall, brick wall. It never failed to give the owner pleasure to look out of this window at his charming English garden where he could watch his English gardener digging the flower-beds or mowing the lawn or sweeping up fallen leaves. There was another window for the afternoon sun, looking towards Winchelsea and doubly glazed against the force of the westerly gales. Three high bookcases, two big writing-desks and an easy chair filled most of the space in the green room, but left enough clear floor for a restricted amount of the pacing exercise that was indispensable to literary composition. On summer days Henry James liked better to work in the large “garden room” which gave him a longer stretch for perambulation and a window overlooking the cobbled street that curved up the hill past his door. He liked to be able to relieve the tension of a difficult sentence by a glance down the street; he enjoyed hailing a passing friend or watching a motor-car pant up the sharp little slope. The sight of one of these vehicles could be counted on to draw from him a vigorous outburst of amazement, admiration, or horror for the complications of an age that produced such efficient monsters for gobbling protective distance.

The business of acting as a medium between the spoken and the typewritten word was at first as alarming as it was fascinating. The most handsome and expensive typewriters exercise as vicious an influence as any others over the spelling of the operator, and the new pattern of a Remington machine which I found installed offered a few additional problems. But Henry

James's patience during my struggles with that baffling mechanism was unailing—he watched me helplessly, for he was one of the few men without the smallest pretension to the understanding of a machine—and he was as easy to spell from as an open dictionary. The experience of years had evidently taught him that it was not safe to leave any word of more than one syllable to luck. He took pains to pronounce every pronounceable letter, he always spelt out words which the ear might confuse with others, and he never left a single punctuation mark unuttered, except sometimes that necessary point, the full stop. Occasionally, in a low "aside" he would interject a few words for the enlightenment of the amanuensis, adding, for instance, after spelling out "The Newcomes," that the words were the title of a novel by one Thackeray.

The practice of dictation was begun in the nineties. By 1907 it was a confirmed habit, its effects being easily recognizable in his style, which became more and more like free, involved, unanswered talk. "I know," he once said to me, "that I'm too diffuse when I'm dictating." But he found dictation not only an easier but a more inspiring method of composing than writing with his own hand, and he considered that the gain in expression more than compensated for any loss of concision. The spelling out of the words, the indication of commas, were scarcely felt as a drag on the movement of his thought. "It all seems," he once explained, "to be so much more effectively and unceasingly *pulled* out of me in speech than in writing." Indeed, at the time when I began to work for him, he had reached a stage at which the click of a Remington machine acted as a positive spur. He found it more difficult to compose to the music of any other make. During a fortnight when the Remington was out of order he dictated to an Oliver typewriter with evident discomfort, and he found it almost impossibly disconcerting to speak to something that made no responsive sound at all. Once or twice when he was ill and in bed I took down a note or two by hand, but as a rule he liked to have the typewriter moved into his bedroom for even the shortest letters. Yet there were to the end certain kinds of work which he was obliged to do with a pen. Plays, if they were to be kept within the limits of possible performance, and short stories, if they were to remain within the bounds of publication

in a monthly magazine, must be written by hand. He was well aware that the manual labour of writing was his best aid to a desired brevity. The plays—such a play as *The Outcry*, for instance—were copied straight from his manuscript, since he was too much afraid of “the murderous limits of the English theatre” to risk the temptation of dictation and embroidery. With the short stories he allowed himself a little more freedom, dictating them from his written draft and expanding them as he went to an extent which inevitably defeated his original purpose. It is almost literally true to say of the sheaf of tales collected in *The Finer Grain* that they were all written in response to a single request for a short story for *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. The length was to be about 5,000 words and each promising idea was cultivated in the optimistic belief that it would produce a flower too frail and small to demand any exhaustive treatment. But even under pressure of being written by hand, with dictated interpolations rigidly restricted, each in turn pushed out to lengths that no chopping could reduce to the word limit. The tale eventually printed was *Crapy Cornelia*, but, although it was the shortest of the batch, it was thought too long to be published in one number and appeared in two sections, to the great annoyance of the author.

III

The method adopted for full-length novels was very different. With a clear run of 100,000 words or more before him, Henry James always cherished the delusive expectation of being able to fit his theme quite easily between the covers of a volume. It was not until he was more than half way through that the problem of space began to be embarrassing. At the beginning he had no questions of compression to attend to, and he “broke ground,” as he said, by talking to himself day by day about the characters and construction until the persons and their actions were vividly present to his inward eye. This soliloquy was of course recorded on the typewriter. He had from far back tended to dramatize all the material that life gave him, and he more and more prefigured his novels as staged performances, arranged in acts and scenes, with the characters making their observed entrances and exits. These scenes he

worked out until he felt himself so thoroughly possessed of the action that he could begin on the dictation of the book itself—a process which has been incorrectly described by one critic as re-dictation from a rough draft. It was nothing of the kind. Owners of the volumes containing *The Ivory Tower* or *The Sense of the Past* have only to turn to the Notes printed at the end to see that the scenario dictated in advance contains practically none of the phrases used in the final work. The two sets of Notes are a different and a much more interesting literary record than a mere draft. They are the framework set up for imagination to clothe with the spun web of life. But they are not bare framework. They are elaborate and abundant. They are the kind of exercise described in *The Death of the Lion* as “a great gossiping eloquent letter—the overflow into talk of an artist’s amorous design.” But the design was thus mapped out with the clear understanding that at a later stage and at closer quarters the subject might grow away from the plan. “In the intimacy of composition pre-noted proportions and arrangements do most uncommonly insist on making themselves different by shifts and variations, always improving, which impose themselves as one goes and keep the door open always to something *more* right and *more* related. It is subject to that constant possibility, all the while, that one does pre-note and tentatively sketch.”*

The preliminary sketch was seldom consulted after the novel began to take permanent shape, but the same method of “talking out” was resorted to at difficult points of the narrative as it progressed, always for the sake of testing in advance the values of the persons involved in a given situation, so that their creator should ensure their right action both for the development of the drama and the truth of their relations to each other. The knowledge of all the conscious motives and concealments of his creatures, gained by unwearied observation of their attitudes behind the scenes, enabled Henry James to exhibit them with a final confidence that dispensed with explanations. Among certain stumbling blocks in the path of the perfect comprehension of his readers is their uneasy doubt of the sincerity of the conversational encounters recorded. Most

* *The Ivory Tower* (Collins, 1917), p. 341.

novelists provide some clue to help their readers to distinguish truth from falsehood, and in the theatre, although husbands and wives may be deceived by lies, the audience is usually privy to the plot. But a study of the Notes to *The Ivory Tower* will make it clear that between the people created by Henry James lying is as frequent as among mortals and not any easier to detect.

For the volumes of memories, *A Small Boy and Others*, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, and the uncompleted *Middle Years*, no preliminary work was needed. A straight dive into the past brought to the surface treasure after treasure, a wealth of material which became embarrassing. The earlier book was begun in 1911, after Henry James had returned from a year in the United States, where he had been called by his brother's fatal illness. He had come back, after many seasons of country solitude, to his former love of the friendly London winter, and for the first few months after his return from America he lodged near the Reform Club and came to the old house in Chelsea where I was living and where he had taken a room for his work. It was a quiet room, long and narrow and rather dark—he used to speak of it as “my Chelsea cellar.” There he settled down to write what, as he outlined it to me, was to be a set of notes to his brother William's early letters, prefaced by a brief account of the family into which they were both born. But an entire volume of memories was finished before bringing William to an age for writing letters, and *A Small Boy* came to a rather abrupt end as a result of the writer's sudden decision that a break must be made at once if the flood of remembrance was not to drown his pious intention.

It was extraordinarily easy for him to recover the past; he had always been sensitive to impressions and his mind was stored with records of exposure. All he had to do was to render his sense of those records as adequately as he could. Each morning, after reading over the pages written the day before, he would settle down in a chair for an hour or so of conscious effort. Then, lifted on a rising tide of inspiration, he would get up and pace up and down the room, sounding out the periods in tones of resonant assurance. At such times he was beyond reach of irrelevant sounds or sights. Hosts of cats—a tribe he usually routed with shouts of execration—might wail outside

the window, phalanxes of motor-cars bearing dreaded visitors might hoot at the door. He heard nothing of them. The only thing that could arrest his progress was the escape of the word he wanted to use. When that had vanished he broke off the rhythmic pacing and made his way to a chimney-piece or book-case tall enough to support his elbows while he rested his head in his hands and audibly pursued the fugitive.

IV

In the autumn of 1907, when I began to tap the Remington typewriter at Henry James's dictation, he was engaged on the arduous task of preparing his *Novels and Tales* for the definitive New York edition, published in 1909. Since it was only between breakfast and luncheon that he undertook what he called "inventive" work, he gave the hours from half-past ten to half-past one to the composition of the prefaces which are so interesting a feature of the edition. In the evenings he read over again the work of former years, treating the printed pages like so many proof-sheets of extremely corrupt text. The revision was a task he had seen in advance as formidable. He had cultivated the habit of forgetting past achievements almost to the pitch of a sincere conviction that nothing he had written before about 1890 could come with any shred of credit through the ordeal of a critical inspection. On a morning when he was obliged to give time to the selection of a set of tales for a forthcoming volume, he confessed that the difficulty of selection was mainly the difficulty of reading them at all. "They seem," he said, "so bad until I *have* read them that I can't force myself to go through them except with a pen in my hand, altering as I go the crudities and ineptitudes that to my sense deform each page." Unfamiliarity and adverse prejudice are rare advantages for a writer to bring to the task of choosing among his works. For Henry James the prejudice might give way to half reluctant appreciation as the unfamiliarity passed into recognition, but it must be clear to every reader of the prefaces that he never lost the sense of being paternally responsible for two distinct families. For the earlier brood, acknowledged fruit of his alliance with Romance, he claimed indulgence on the ground of their youthful spontaneity, their

confident assurance, their rather touching good faith. One catches echoes of a plea that these elderly youngsters may not be too closely compared, to their inevitable disadvantage, with the richly endowed, the carefully bred, the highly civilized and sensitized children of his second marriage, contracted with that wealthy bride, Experience. Attentive readers of the novels may perhaps find the distinction between these two groups less remarkable than it seemed to their writer. They may even wonder whether the second marriage was not rather a silver wedding, with the old romantic mistress cleverly disguised as a woman of the world. The different note was possibly due more to the substitution of dictation for pen and ink than to any profound change of heart. But whatever the reason, their author certainly found it necessary to spend a good deal of time working on the earlier tales before he considered them fit for appearance in the company of those composed later. Some members of the elder family he entirely cast off, not counting them worth the expense of completely new clothes. Others he left in their place more from a necessary, though deprecated, respect for the declared taste of the reading public than because he loved them for their own sake. It would, for instance, have been difficult to exclude *Daisy Miller* from any representative collection of his work, yet the popularity of the tale had become almost a grievance. To be acclaimed as the author of *Daisy Miller* by persons blandly unconscious of *The Wings of the Dove* or *The Golden Bowl* was a reason among many for Henry James's despair of intelligent comprehension. Confronted repeatedly with *Daisy*, he felt himself rather in the position of some *grande dame* who, with a jewel-case of sparkling diamonds, is constrained by her admirers always to appear in the simple string of moonstones worn at her first dance.

From the moment he began to read over the earlier tales, he found himself involved in a highly practical examination of the scope and limits of permissible revision. Poets, as he pointed out, have often revised their verse with good effect. Why should the novelist not have equal license? The only sound reason for not altering anything is a conviction that it cannot be improved. It was Henry James's profound conviction that he could improve his early writing in nearly every sentence. Not to revise would have been to confess to a loss of faith in

himself, and it was not likely that the writer who had fasted for forty years in the wilderness of British and American misconceptions without yielding a scrap of intellectual integrity to editorial or publishing tempters should have lost faith in himself. But he was well aware that the game of revision must be played with a due observance of the rules. He knew that no novelist can safely afford to repudiate his fundamental understanding with his readers that the tale he has to tell is at least as true as history and the figures he has set in motion at least as independently alive as the people we see in offices and motor-cars. He allowed himself few freedoms with any recorded appearances or actions, although occasionally the temptation to correct a false gesture, to make it "right," was too strong to be resisted. We have a pleasant instance of this correction in the second version of *The American*. At her first appearance, the old Marquise de Bellegarde had acknowledged the introduction of Newman by returning his handshake "with a sort of British positiveness which reminded him that she was the daughter of the Earl of St. Dunstan's." In the later edition she behaves differently. "Newman came sufficiently near to the old lady by the fire to take in that she would offer him no handshake. . . . Madame de Bellegarde looked hard at him and refused what she did refuse with a sort of British positiveness which reminded him that she was the daughter of the Earl of St. Dunstan's." There were good reasons why the Marquise should have denied Newman a welcoming handshake. Her attitude throughout the book was to be consistently hostile and should never have been compromised by the significantly British grip. Yet it is almost shocking to see her snatching back her first card after playing it for so many years. She was to perform less credible actions than shaking hands with an innocent American, as her progenitor knew very well. He invited his readers, in the preface to *The American*, to observe the impossible behaviour of the noble Bellegarde family, but he realized that since they had been begotten in absurdity the Bellegardes could under no stress of revision achieve a very solid humanity. The best he could do for them was to let a faint consciousness flush the mind of Valentin, the only detached member of the family. In the first edition Valentin warned his friend of the Bellegarde peculiarities with the easy

good faith of the younger Henry James under the spell of the magic word "Europe." "My mother is strange, my brother is strange, and I verily believe I am stranger than either. Old trees have queer cracks, old races have odd secrets." To this statement he added in the revised version: "We're fit for a museum or a Balzac novel." A comparable growth of ironic perception was allowed to Roderick Hudson, whose comment on Rowland's admission of his heroically silent passion for Mary Garland, "It's like something in a novel," was altered to: "It's like something in a bad novel."

V

But the legitimate business of revision was, for Henry James, neither substitution nor re-arrangement. It was the demonstration of values implicit in the earlier work, the retrieval of neglected opportunities for adequate "renderings." "It was," as he explained in his final preface, "all sensibly, as if the clear matter being still there, even as a shining expanse of snow spread over a plain, my exploring tread, for application to it, had quite unlearned the old pace and found itself naturally falling into another, which might sometimes more or less agree with the original tracks, but might most often, or very nearly, break the surface at other places. What was thus predominantly interesting to note, at all events, was the high spontaneity of these deviations and differences, which become thus things not of choice but of immediate and perfect necessity: necessity to the end of dealing with the quantities in question at all." On every page the act of re-reading became automatically one with the act of re-writing, and the revised parts are just "those rigid conditions of re-perusal, registered; so many close notes, as who should say, on the particular vision of the matter itself that experience had at last made the only possible one." These are words written with the clear confidence of the artist who, in complete possession of his "faculties," had no need to bother himself with doubts as to his ability to write better at the end of a lifetime of hard work and varied experience than at the beginning. He knew he could write better. His readers have not always agreed with his own view. They have denounced the multiplication of qualifying clauses, the imposition of a system

of punctuation which, although rigid and orderly, occasionally fails to act as a guide to immediate comprehension of the writer's intention, and the increasing passion for adverbial interpositions. "Adjectives are the sugar of literature and adverbs the salt," was Henry James's reply to a criticism which once came to his ears.

It must be admitted that the case for the revised version relies on other merits than simplicity or elegance to make its claim good. It is not so smooth, nor so easy, nor, on the whole, so pretty as the older form. But it is nearly always richer and more alive. Abstractions give place to sharp definite images, loose vague phrases to close-locked significances. We can find a fair example of this in *The Madonna of the Future*, a tale first published in 1879. In the original version one of the sentences runs: "His professions, somehow, were all half professions, and his allusions to his work and circumstances left something dimly ambiguous in the background." In the New York Edition this has become: "His professions were practically somehow, all masks and screens, and his personal allusions as to his ambiguous background mere wavings of the dim lantern." In some passages it would be hard to deny a gain of beauty as well as of significance. There is, for instance, a sentence in the earlier account of Newman's silent renunciation of his meditated revenge, in the Cathedral of Notre Dame: "He sat a long time; he heard far-away bells chiming off, at long intervals, to the rest of the world." In the definitive edition of *The American* the passage has become: "He sat a long time; he heard far-away bells chiming off into space, at long intervals, the big bronze syllables of the Word."

A paragraph from *Four Meetings*, a tale worked over with extreme care, will give a fair idea of the general effect of the revision. It records a moment of the final Meeting, when the helplessly indignant narrator is watching poor Caroline ministering to the vulgar French cocotte who has imposed herself on the hospitality of the innocent little New Englander.

"At this moment," runs the passage of 1879, "Caroline Spencer came out of the house bearing a coffee pot on a little tray. I noticed that on her way from the door to the table she gave me a single quick vaguely appealing glance. I wondered what it signified; I felt that it signified a sort of half-frightened

longing to know what, as a man of the world who had been in France, I thought of the Countess. It made me extremely uncomfortable. I could not tell her that the Countess was very possibly the runaway wife of a little hairdresser. I tried, suddenly, on the contrary, to show a high consideration for her.”

The “particular vision” registered on re-perusal reveals states of mind much more definite than these wonderings and longings and vague appeals.

“Our hostess moreover at this moment came out of the house, bearing a coffee-pot and three cups on a neat little tray. I took from her eyes, as she approached us, a brief but intense appeal—the mute expression, as I felt, conveyed in the hardest little look she had yet addressed me, of her longing to know what as a man of the world in general and of the French world in particular, I thought of these allied forces now so encamped on the stricken field of her life. I could only ‘act,’ however, as they said at North Verona, quite impenetrably—only make no answering sign. I couldn’t intimate, much less could I frankly utter, my inward sense of the Countess’s probable past, with its measure of her virtue, value and accomplishments, and of the limits of consideration to which she could properly pretend. I couldn’t give my friend a hint of how I myself personally ‘saw’ her interesting pensioner—whether as the runaway wife of a too-jealous hair-dresser or of a too-morose pastry-cook, say; whether as a very small bourgeoisie, in fine, who had vitiated her case beyond patching up, or even some character of the nomadic sort, less edifying still. I couldn’t let in, by the jog of a shutter, as it were, a hard informing ray and then, washing my hands of the business, turn my back for ever. I could on the contrary but save the situation, my own at least, for the moment, by pulling myself together with a master hand and appearing to ignore everything but that the dreadful person between us *was* a ‘grande dame.’”

Anyone genuinely interested in “the how and the whence and the why these intenser lights of experience come into being and insist on shining,” will find it a profitable exercise to read and compare the old and the new versions of any of the novels or tales first published during the ’seventies or ’eighties. Such a reader will be qualified to decide for himself between the opinion of a bold young critic that “all the works have

been subjected to a revision which in several cases, notably *Daisy Miller* and *Four Meetings*, amounts to their ruin," and their writer's confidence that "I shouldn't have breathed upon the old catastrophes and accidents, the old wounds and mutilations and disfigurements wholly in vain. . . . I have prayed that the finer air of the better form may sufficiently seem to hang about them and gild them over—at least for readers, however few, at all *curious* of questions of air and form."

VI

Explanatory prefaces and elaborate revisions, short stories and long memories, were far from being the complete tale of literary labour during the last eight years of Henry James's life. A new era for English drama was prophesied in 1907. Led by Miss Horniman, advocates of the repertory system were marching forward, capturing one by one the intellectual centres of the provinces. In London, repertory seasons were announced in two West-end theatres. Actor-managers began to ask for "non-commercial" plays and when their appeal reached Henry James it met with a quick response. The theatre had both allured and repelled him for many years, and he had already been the victim of a theatrical misadventure. His assertions that he wrote plays solely in the hope of making money should not, I think, be taken as the complete explanation of his dramas. It is pretty clear that he wrote plays because he wanted to write them, because he was convinced that his instinct for dramatic situations could find a happy outlet in plays, because writing for the stage is a game rich in precise rules and he delighted in the multiplication of technical difficulties, and because he lived in circles more addicted to the intelligent criticism of plays than to the intelligent criticism of novels. The plays he wrote in the early 'nineties are very careful exercises in technique. They are derived straight from the light comedies of the Parisian stage, with the difference that in the 'nineties, for all their advertised naughtiness, there were even stricter limits to the free representation of Parisian situations on English stages than there are to-day. In *The Reprobate*, a play successfully produced a few years ago by the Stage Society, the lady whose hair has changed from black to red and from red to

gold is the centre of the drama, she holds the key to the position, but all her complicating effect depends upon the past—pasts being allowed on every stage comparative license of reference. The compromising evidence is all a matter of old photographs and letters, and the play loses in vividness whatever it may gain in respectability. Nobody knew better than the author that *The Reprobate* was not a good play. Terror of being cut forbade him to work on a subject of intrinsic importance. With another hour guaranteed, a playwright might attempt anything, but “he does not get his hour, and he will probably begin by missing his subjects. He takes, in his dread of complication, a minor one, and it’s heavy odds that the minor one, with the habit of small natures, will prove thankless.”

Other early plays had been converted into novels or tales and so published. One of these, written originally for Miss Ellen Terry but never produced by her, had appeared as an incongruous companion to *The Turn of the Screw* in the volume entitled *The Two Magics*. A few attentive readers had seen the dramatic possibilities of *Covering End*, and when it was suggested to Henry James that he should convert it into a three-act comedy for production by Mr. Forbes Robertson (as he was then) and Miss Gertrude Elliot, he willingly consented. Flying under a new flag, as *The High Bid*, the play was produced in London in February, 1909, but only for a series of matinées, the prodigious success of *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* precluding the possibility of an evening for any other production under the same management. Under the inspiration of the repertory movement, other material was re-cast for acting. *The Other House* was re-dictated as a tragedy. *Owen Wingrave* became *The Saloon*, a one-act play produced by Miss Gertrude Kingston in 1910. Finally an entirely new three-act comedy, *The Outcry*, was written round the highly topical subject of the sale of art treasures to rich Americans. It was not produced during Henry James’s life. At the time when it should have been rehearsed he was ill and the production was postponed. On his recovery, he went to the United States for a year, and when he came back the day of repertory performances had died in a fresh night of stars.

When *The Outcry* was given by the Stage Society in 1917, it was evident that the actors were embarrassed by their lines, for

by 1909, when the play was written, the men and women of Henry James could talk only in the manner of their creator. His own speech, assisted by the practice of dictating, had by that time become so inveterately characteristic that his questions to a railway clerk about a ticket or to a fishmonger about a lobster, might easily be recognized as coined in the same mint as his addresses to the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature. Apart from this difficulty of enunciating the lines, *The Outcry* has all the advantages over the earlier plays. The characters are real and they act from adequate motives. The solution of the presented problem, which requires, like most of the author's solutions, a change of heart, is worked out with admirable art, without any use of the mechanical shifts and stage properties needed in *The Reprobate*. It is not very difficult to believe that if Henry James had been encouraged twenty years earlier to go on writing plays he might have made a name as a dramatist, but the faithful may be forgiven for rejoicing that the playwright was sacrificed to the novelist and critic.

VII

Many men whose prime business is the art of writing find rest and refreshment in other occupations. They marry or they keep dogs, they play golf or bridge, they study Sanskrit or collect postage stamps. Except for a period of ownership of a dachshund, Henry James did none of these things. He lived a life consecrated to the service of a jealous, insatiable, and supremely rewarding goddess, and all his activities had essential reference to that service. He had a great belief in the virtues of air and exercise, and he was expert at making a walk of two or three miles last for as many hours by his habit of punctuating movement with frequent and prolonged halts for meditation or conversation. He liked the exhilaration of driving in a motor-car, which gave him, he said, "a sense of spiritual adventure." He liked a communicative companion. Indeed the cultivation of friendships may be said to have been his sole recreation. To the very end of his life he was quick to recognize every chance of forming a friendly relation, swift to act on his recognition, and beautifully ready to protect and nourish the

warm life of engendered affection. His letters, especially those written in his later years, are more than anything else great generous gestures of remembrance, gathering up and embracing his correspondents much as his talk would gather up his hearers and sweep them along on a rising flood of eloquence.

But that fine capacity for forming and maintaining a "relation" worked, inevitably, within definite limits. He was obliged to create impassable barriers between himself and the rest of mankind before he could stretch out his eager hands over safe walls to beckon and to bless. He loved his friends, but he was condemned by the law of his being to keep clear of any really entangling net of human affection and exaction. His contacts had to be subordinate, or indeed ancillary, to the vocation he had followed with a single passion from the time when, as a small boy, he obtained a report from his tutor as showing no great aptitude for anything but a felicitous rendering of La Fontaine's fables into English. Nothing could be allowed to interfere for long with the labour from which Henry James never rested, unless perhaps during sleep. When his "morning stint of inventive work" was over, he went forth to the renewed assault of the impressions that were always lying in wait for him. He was perpetually and mercilessly exposed, incessantly occupied with the task of assimilating his experience, freeing the pure workable metal from the base, remoulding it into new beauty with the aid of every device of his craft. He used his friends not, as some incompletely inspired artists do, as in themselves the material of his art, but as the sources of his material. He took everything they could give and he gave it back in his books. With this constant preoccupation, it was natural that the people least interesting to him were the comparatively dumb. To be "inarticulate" was for him the cardinal social sin. It amounted to a wilful withholding of treasures of alien experience. And if he could extract no satisfaction from contemplating the keepers of golden silence, he could gain little more from intercourse with the numerous persons he dismissed from his attention as "simple organisms." These he held to be mere waste of any writer's time, and it was characteristic that his constant appreciation of the works of Mrs. Wharton was baffled by the popularity of *Ethan Frome*, because he considered that the gifted author had spent her labour on

creatures too easily comprehensible to be worth her pains. He greatly preferred *The Reef*, where, as he said, "she deals with persons really fine and complicated."

We might arrive at the same conclusion from a study of the prefaces to the New York Edition. More often than not, the initial idea for a tale came to Henry James through the medium of other people's talk. From a welter of anecdote he could unerringly pick out the living nucleus for a reconstructed and balanced work of art. His instinct for selection was admirable, and he could afford to let it range freely among a profusion of proffered subjects, secure that it would alight on the most promising. But he liked to have the subjects presented with a little artful discrimination, even in the first instance. He was dependent on conversation, but it must be educated and up to a point intelligent conversation. There is an early letter written from Italy in 1874, in which he complains of having hardly spoken to an Italian creature in nearly a year's sojourn, "save washerwomen and waiters. This, you'll say, is my own stupidity," he continues, "but granting this gladly, it proves that even a creature addicted as much to sentimentalizing as I am over the whole *mise en scène* of Italian life, doesn't find an easy initiation into what lies behind it. Sometimes I am overwhelmed with the pitifulness of this absurd want of reciprocity between Italy itself and all my rhapsodies about it." Other wanderers might have found more of Italy in washerwomen and waiters, here guaranteed to be the true native article, than in all the nobility of Rome or the Anglo-Americans of Venice, but that was not Henry James's way. For him neither pearls nor diamonds fell from the lips of waiters and washerwomen, and princesses never walked in his world disguised as goose-girls.

Friendships are maintained by the communication of speech and letters. Henry James was a voluminous letter-writer and exhaustively communicative in his talk upon every subject but one, his own work, which was his own real life. It was not because he was indifferent to what people thought of his books that he evaded discussion about them. He was always touched and pleased by any evidence that he had been intelligently read, but he never went a step out of his way to seek this assurance. He found it safest to assume that nobody read him, and

he liked his friends none the worse for their incapacity. Meanwhile, the volumes of his published works—visible, palpable, readable proof of that unceasing travail of the creative spirit which was always labouring behind the barrier of his silence—piled themselves up year after year, to be dropped on to the tables of booksellers and pushed on to the shelves of libraries, to be bought and cherished by the faithful, ignored by the multitude, and treated as a test of mental endurance by the kind of person who organized the Browning Society. Fortunately for literature, Henry James did not lend himself to exploitation by any Jacobean Society. Instead of inventing riddles for prize students, he scattered about his pages a number of pregnant passages containing all the clues that are needed for keeping up with him. It was his theory that if readers didn't keep up with him—as they admittedly didn't always—the fault was entirely in their failure of attention. There are revelations in his books, just as he declared them to be in the works of Neil Paraday. "Extract the opinion, disengage the answer—these are the real acts of homage."

VIII

From his familiar correspondence we need not hope to extract as considered an opinion or as definite an answer as from the novels, but his letters are extraordinarily valuable as side-lights, helping us to see how it happened that any man was able to progress along so straight a path from one end of his life to another. The two volumes of memories are clear evidence of the kind of temperamental make-up with which Henry James was gifted, the two volumes of letters show how his life contributed to preserve and enhance his rare capacity for taking and keeping impressions. They show him too as unusually impervious to everything which is not an impression of visual images or a sense of a human situation. He was very little troubled by a number of ideas which press with an increasing weight upon the minds of most educated persons. Not until the outbreak of the Great War was he moved to utter a forcible "opinion" about affairs outside his personal range. He was delightfully free from the common delusion that by grouping individuals in arbitrary classes and by twisting

harmless adjectives into abstract nouns it is possible for us to think of more than one thing at a time and to conceive of qualities apart from their manifestation. What he saw he possessed; what he understood he criticized, but he never reckoned it to be any part of his business to sit in judgment on the deeds of men working in alien material for inartistic ends, or to speculate about the nature of the universe or the conflict or reconciliation of science with religion. He could let Huxley and Gladstone, the combatant champions of Darwinism and orthodox theology, enrich the pages of a single letter without any reference to their respective beliefs. "Huxley is a very genial, comfortable being . . . But of course my talk with him is mere amiable generalities." Of Gladstone there is a little more, but again the personal impression is the thing sought. "I was glad of a chance to feel the 'personality' of a great political leader—or as G. is now thought here even, I think, by his partisans, ex-leader. That of Gladstone is very fascinating—his urbanity extreme—his eye that of a man of genius—and his apparent self-surrender to what he is talking of without a flaw. He made a great impression on me." One would like to know what the subject was to which Gladstone had surrendered himself in his talk with this entranced young American, who must surely, for his part, have been as much reduced conversationally to "mere amiable generalities" as on the occasion of his meeting Huxley. It is difficult to think of a single likely point of contact between the minds of Gladstone and Henry James. But that, for delicacy of registration, was an advantage. The recording instrument could perform its work without the hindrance of any distraction of attention from the man himself to the matter of his speech, which did not presumably contain any germ for cultivation into fiction.

His nationality saved Henry James from the common English necessity of taking a side in the political game; and in the United States nobody of his world had expected him to be interested in politics. There is a pleasant account in *The Middle Years* of his blankness when he was asked at a London breakfast-table for "distinctness about General Grant's first cabinet, upon the formation of which the light of the newspaper happened then to beat." The question was embarrassing. "There were, it appeared, things of interest taking place in

America, and I had had, in this absurd manner, to come to England to learn it: I had had over there on the ground itself no conception of any such matter—nothing of the smallest interest, by any perception of mine, as I suppose I should still blush to recall, had taken place in America since the War.” Nothing of any great public interest, by any perception of his, was to take place in Europe until the outbreak of another war at that time far beyond the range of speculation. But if cabinets and parties and politics were and remained outside the pale of his sensibility, he was none the less charmed by the customs of a country where Members of Parliament and Civil Servants could meet together for a leisurely breakfast, thus striking “the exciting note of a social order in which everyone wasn’t hurled straight, with the momentum of rising, upon an office or a store.”

IX

Henry James came to England to admire. But his early reverence for the men and women of an island with so fine and ancient a historic tone as Great Britain soon faded. He had forgotten, in the first passion of acquaintance, that the English are born afresh in every generation and are about as new as young Americans, differing from them chiefly in having other forms of domestic and ecclesiastical architecture and smoother lawns to take for granted. He looked at old stone castles and Tudor brickwork, at great hanging eaves and immemorial gardens, and then he looked at the heirs of this heritage and listened intently for their speech. This was disappointing, partly because they spoke so little. “I rarely remember,” he wrote when he had lived through several London months, “to have heard on English lips any other intellectual verdict (no matter under what provocation) than this broad synthesis ‘so immensely clever.’ What exasperates you is not that they can’t say more but that they wouldn’t if they could.”

How different was this inarticulate world from the fine civilization of Boston, from the cultivated circle that gathered round Charles Eliot Norton at Shady Hill. To that circle he appealed for sympathy, complaining that he was “sinking into dull British acceptance and conformity. . . . I am losing my

standard—my charming little standard that I used to think so high; my standard of wit, of grace, of good manners, of vivacity, of urbanity, of intelligence, of what makes an easy and natural style of intercourse! And this in consequence of having dined out during the past winter 107 times!” Great men, or at the least men with great names, swam into his ken and he condemned them. Ruskin was “weakness pure and simple.” In Paris he found that he could “easily—more than easily—see all round Flaubert intellectually.” A happy Sunday evening at Madame Viardot’s provoked a curious reflection on the capacity of celebrated Europeans to behave absurdly and the incapacity of celebrated Americans to indulge in similar antics. “It was both strange and sweet to see poor Turgenev acting charades of the most extravagant description, dressed out in old shawls, and masks, going on all fours, etc. The charades are their usual Sunday evening occupation and the good faith with which Turgenev, at his age and with his glories, can go into them is a striking example of the truth of that spontaneity which Europeans have and we have not. Fancy Longfellow, Lowell, or Charles Norton doing the like and every Sunday evening!”

Whether or not all celebrated Americans behave with invariable decorum, the astonished spectator of Turgenev’s performance had no temptation to “do the like.” His appearance among a company of artists and writers gathered together in a country village during the late summer of 1886 has been characteristically recorded by Mr. Edmund Gosse. “Henry James was the only sedate one of us all—benign, indulgent, but grave, and not often unbending beyond a genial chuckle. . . . It is remembered with what affability he wore a garland of flowers at a birthday feast, and even, nobly descending, took part one night in a cakewalk. But mostly, though not much our senior, he was serious, mildly avuncular, but very happy and unupbraiding.”

By that time Henry James was at his ease in England. The inhabitants were no longer either gods or imbeciles. Through the general British fog he had perceived gleams of intelligence shining on his bewilderment. He was no longer wholly dependent on Boston for refreshment. He could fall back upon the

company of Mr. Edmund Gosse and he had found a friend in R. L. Stevenson. The little handful of Islanders possessed of a genuine interest in the art of letters and the criticism of life emerged from the obscurity, and he made out that, on the whole, there were perhaps about as many civilized people in England as in his native land. Yet he was a little troubled about his position. He wondered, while he reviewed the past, whether the path he had so carefully chosen for himself was the right one, whether he might not have missed more by leaving the United States than he had gained by coming to England. He lamented, in a letter written to his brother William in 1899, that he had not had the kind of early experience that might have attached him to his own country. He earnestly advised a different treatment for his nephews. "What I most of all feel, and in the light of it conjure you to keep doing for them, is their being *à même* to contract local saturations and attachments in respect to their *own* great and glorious country, to learn, and strike roots into, its infinite beauty, as I suppose, and variety. . . . Its being their 'own' will double their *use* of it."

It was only after a visit to America in 1904 that he found, on his return to Rye, that he had a home and a country. He was able after this discovery to write to Mrs. Wharton that "your only drawback is not having the homeliness and the inevitability and the happy limitation and the affluent poverty, of a Country of your Own (*comme moi, par exemple!*)"; and he could declare after taking the Oath of Allegiance to the King of England in 1915 that "I was really too associated before for any nominal change to matter. The process has only shown me what I virtually *was*—so that it's rather disappointing in respect to acute sensation. I *haven't* any." Associated he certainly was, allied by innumerable sympathies and affections to the adopted country. But he was never really English or American or even Cosmopolitan. And it is too difficult to suppose that even if he had passed all his youth in New England and contracted all the local saturations and attachments he urged for his nephews he could ever have melted comfortably into American uniformity. He, who took nothing in the world for granted, could surely never have taken New England for granted.

To-day, with the complete record before us—the novels,

criticisms, biographies, plays, and letters—we can understand how little those international relations that engaged Henry James's attention mattered to his genius. Wherever he might have lived and whatever human interactions he might have observed, he would in all probability have reached much the same conclusion that he arrived at by the way of America, France, and England. When he walked out of the refuge of his study into the world and looked about him, he saw a place of torment, where creatures of prey perpetually thrust their claws into the quivering flesh of the doomed, defenceless children of light. He had the abiding comfort of an inner certainty (and perhaps he did bring that from New England) that the children of light had an eternal advantage; he was aware to the finest fibre of his being that the "poor sensitive gentlemen" he so numerously treated possessed a treasure that would outlast all the glittering paste of the world and the flesh; he knew that nothing in life mattered compared with spiritual decency.

We may conclude that the nationalities of his betrayed and triumphant victims are not an important factor. They may equally well be innocent Americans maltreated by odious Europeans, refined Europeans fleeced by unscrupulous Americans, or young children of any race exposed to evil influences. The essential fact is that wherever he looked Henry James saw fineness apparently sacrificed to grossness, beauty to avarice, truth to a bold front. He realized how constantly the tenderness of growing life is at the mercy of personal tyranny and he hated the tyranny of persons over each other. His novels are a repeated exposure of this wickedness, a reiterated and passionate plea for the fullest freedom of development, unimperilled by reckless and barbarous stupidity.

He was himself most scrupulously careful not to exercise any tyrannical power over other people. The only advice he ever permitted himself to offer to a friend was a recommendation to "let your soul live." Towards the end of his days his horror of interfering, or seeming to interfere, with the freedom of others became so overpowering that it was a misery for him to suspect that the plans of his friends might be made with reference to himself. Much as he enjoyed seeing them, he so disliked to think that they were undergoing the discomfort of voyages and railway journeys in order to be near him that he

would gladly have prevented their start if he could. His Utopia was an anarchy where nobody would be responsible for any other human being but only for his own civilized character. His circle of friends will easily recall how finely Henry James had fitted himself to be a citizen of this commonwealth.