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978-0-521-12922-0 - Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James

Alwyn Berland

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

The major theme

THE PROGRESS OF CRITICISM

Even if Henry James were not as *present* in every consideration of modern fiction as he is, too much has been written about him during the last fifty or sixty years to justify another re-evaluation now. The writing about James in these years provides, with its divergent assumptions and conclusions, if not a consistent evaluation of James's fiction, at least some curious insights into contemporary cultural history.

What makes this history so interesting in relation to James is not so much its variety as its contradictions. Novelists manifestly second-rate have had their defenders; novelists clearly very good have been attacked. But no other novelist in English has had the ambiguous triumph of being called the very best and – in terms of really serious claims – the worst; the richest and the dullest, the most meaningful and the most devoid of substance. If the enterprising reader will but look for them he will find critics enough who write off Scott as too boring, Dickens as too vulgar, Sterne as too sentimental, or Jane Austen as – too much a lady. But these objections are rarely at the extreme, just as the praise given them, with a possible exception in Miss Austen's case, is rarely unqualified. But when one gets to Henry James, nothing is taken for granted; there is no peace in the land. He has been called a fraud and a genius. And while these terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they are meant to be so in James's case.

Certain aspects of James's fiction antagonize readers, whether they happen to be literary critics or not. And there are elements in the contemporary cultural tradition which are strong enough

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Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Culture and conduct in the novels of Henry James*

to make readers, even when they are not antagonized, feel that they should be. One consequence is that a good deal of James criticism is not merely discriminatory, weighing the good and the bad and striking a balance, but apologetic. It insists so strongly on the good that any mention of the bad is embarrassing. Or it deals so extravagantly with the bad that even the hostile critic feels compelled to buttress his attack with a machinery of apologetics, most frequently that of social and biographical explanation.

I want then to be unambiguous. I think it is worth insisting that the superior James novels rank with the very best of modern fiction, indeed, with the best of *all* fiction in English. At the same time, certain limitations emerge when one looks at James's collected fiction as a single created world, granting for the moment that this is really possible and not merely a critical cliché.

Excepting *The Princess Casamassima*, where the protagonist is a London artisan (though protected against mere plebeianism by an elaborate apologetic of being the bastard of an English lord), and several stories – 'Brooksmith', 'In the Cage', and 'The Bench of Desolation' most notably – the too exclusive concern in James's fiction is with characters from the upper middle class and aristocracy, a concentration which renders his world rather less full than one might wish.¹ True, his characters are sometimes without money, but they are apt to represent a fallen or embarrassed gentility; they think and act as aristocrats. As a consequence, there is not the richness of human reference, the completeness of lived experience, which the novel perhaps more than any other literary form is able to provide.

Further, his important characters tend too consistently to be extremely intelligent, subtle, and sensitive, remarkably conscious and articulate. James usually can manage a willing suspension of disbelief within each single novel, but when the reader comes to think of these people as a gallery of 'represent-

¹ Even in these stories there are usually special circumstances: Brooksmith is a butler spoiled by his civilized associations for his 'proper' station; his poverty seems simply accidental rather than essential.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The major theme*

3

tative' men and women, a certain amount of resistance, if not of revulsion, is almost inevitable. Given the dismal spectacle of the contemporary naturalistic novel, I should not wish to argue for the statistical average, nor even for the formula which William Dean Howells was defending in James's time: 'The simple, natural, and honest',² a formula which no doubt sounds better than its applications in fiction have, apart from Tolstoy, ever managed to be. What needs to be argued for is a sense of the variousness of the human condition. I wish that James did not so persistently see nobility of character in terms so indissolubly wedded to acute personal awareness and intelligence. When James insists that Hamlet and Lear are 'finely aware' and that this quality of articulate consciousness 'makes absolutely the intensity of their adventure, gives the maximum of sense to what befalls them'³ we can hardly disagree. Neither might we argue against a comparative indifference to what happens to the 'stupid, the coarse, and the blind', although it might be less chilling to say rather that we do not care in the same way. On the other hand, both Hamlet and Lear are capable of failures of intelligence which James's protagonists might blush to admit. But a more serious complication in this comparison is that in confronting life Shakespeare's two heroes are capable of a full vitality which James's characters might (one sometimes fears) also blush to admit.

Although James's protagonists have among them a certain range, they tend to be too much alike in their high controlled refinement. Although James does invent simpler characters for comic relief, his 'fools who minister' to the characters that 'count', they are usually too distinctly compartmentalized as comic relief, too manifestly props to the attention which rightly belongs to the happy few. A pantheon of intellectual and moral giants is doubtless more edifying than a world of grubs, as found in certain exponents of literary naturalism, but not necessarily more representative of human actuality.

James was aware that many readers were suspicious of, or hostile toward, his representative characters. His criticism, like

² As in chapter 2 of Howells's *Criticism and Fiction* (New York, 1891).

³ Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, p. ix.

Cambridge University Press

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Alwyn Berland

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Culture and conduct in the novels of Henry James*

that of T. S. Eliot, is primarily an exploration and defence of his own artistic intentions. His self-justification for his characters lies in the exercise of what he calls 'operative irony': his characters are not as men usually are, he admits, but they are as men might well be:

It's . . . a campaign, of a sort, on behalf of the something better . . . that blessedly, as it is assumed, *might* be . . . It implies and projects the possible other case, the case rich and edifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain.⁴

James disliked artistic campaigns in general, and his critical theories were all opposed to the didactic. Nevertheless, James's fiction is in its very essence a campaign on behalf of the 'something better', and his conception of character, though it may be thought to limit his range of human reference, is dictated by his central thematic concerns.

The very bulk of James criticism is prodigious. The amount of speculating, of theorizing, of false tracks laid down and then corrected, is staggering, especially when one remembers into what neglect James's fiction had fallen during his lifetime, or reads of his own battered awareness of that neglect. Still, a certain amount of the damage accomplished by some critics has been repaired by others. It may be useful here to remember Dr Johnson on Shakespeare:

The chief desire of him that comments an author is to show how much other commentators have corrupted and obscured him. The opinions prevalent in one age as truths above the reach of controversy are confuted and rejected in another, and rise again to reception in remoter times. Thus the human mind is kept in motion without progress.⁵

The much-advertised critical revolution of the twentieth century has meant mainly that Johnson's cycles of succeeding ages have been compressed into the arguments and tergiversations of succeeding issues of the quarterly reviews.

4 Preface to *The Lesson of the Master*, p. x.

5 Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare*', in *Eighteenth Century Critical Essays*, ed. Scott Elledge (Ithaca, N.Y., 1961), vol. II, p. 675.

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Alwyn Berland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The major theme*

5

Some progress may be claimed, nonetheless. The earlier and far-fetched charge that James was fundamentally anti-American in his sympathies has been disproved. Many critics have rallied to point out the frequent – indeed, sometimes embarrassing – moral triumphs of Americans in the conflicts of the famous international novels. Christopher Newman, Isabel Archer, Lambert Strether, Milly Theale, all emerge from their respective tales as better people than the Europeans with whom they deal. There is a hierarchy even among his Americans: those who remain loyal to their roots are better than the alienated, or deracinated, or superficially Europeanized, who actually are apt to be the most ominous characters in James's fiction. Christina Light, Madame Merle, Gilbert Osmond, Charlotte Stant – these are all Europeans by adoption, but by adoption only. Any claim that James categorically preferred the European aristocracy to his American characters can proceed only from naïveté or prejudice. It is necessary, in fact, to recognize the opposite prejudice as it functions in *The American*, for instance, or in *The Golden Bowl*.

On aesthetic and formalistic grounds, the economy and discipline, the tightening and deepening of fictional form, the self-consciousness of technique have been major factors contributing to the appreciation of James, and explain particularly the preference for the late novels as expressed directly or implicitly by such critics as Ezra Pound, Percy Lubbock, and F. O. Matthiessen. The last three novels, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* – as well as the two unfinished novels, *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past* – are claimed to represent James at his best. I consider *The Golden Bowl* essentially a failure, and *The Wings of the Dove* both very moving and very flawed. But I want to avoid the 'either-or' trap which too many critics have fallen into when arguing for a given Jamesian phase or period. It seems to me more useful here to be descriptive of important differences. The late works minimize 'story' in its traditional sense, substituting a deeper and deeper probing into 'character'. Character is not developed in a traditional focus on the individual so much as on a creation of character in terms of *others*. We are given not individuals

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Alwyn Berland

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Culture and conduct in the novels of Henry James*

so much as relationships, though the reader may ultimately remove from the tight context of their various relationships the rather fabulous individuals who make up the Jamesian world. The prose is difficult, convolute, analytical. It becomes more mannered and more personal than the early style. The demands of narration, exposition, or dialogue may vary, but the late voice is always the voice of the master.

The dialogue moves slowly, sometimes tortuously, through the steady intimations of what is never spoken at all. It progresses like agony in an echo-chamber, where each character, through interrogative repetitions of the other's phrases or sentences, forces still further revelations which seem impossible for direct statement. Or the characters leap across the chasms of the unspoken as on ice floes in the raging currents of the portentous.

The much-dressed symbolism and imagery of the late novels are not different from, but consonant with, the other developments of technique. The tendency toward intensive concentration within a limited frame is marked in plot, in situation, in characterization, *and* in the stylistic techniques employed for exploring all of these. The symbolism tends to be as sustained as the virtuoso passages of introspection, of investigated motive, of analysed response. While a good deal can be learned from a study of the later symbolism, it is a mistake, I think, to define the difference between early novels and late simply in terms of imagery.⁶ James's use of symbolism and imagery, especially in the later novels, is one aspect of an increasingly complex and intensified concern with form, and this is related to the development of idea and of vision. What impresses me is not a qualitative change in James's use of symbolism, but the wonderful consonance expressed in almost every aspect of his art.

The increasing complexity and concentration of vision and form in the later novels of James is not necessarily all gain, however. Lambert Strether is a conception superior to Chris-

6 An eminent example of 'image analysis' of James's later fiction is M. Allott's 'Symbolism and image in the later work of Henry James', *Essays in Criticism*, III (1953), pp. 321-36.

Cambridge University Press

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Alwyn Berland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The major theme*

7

topher Newman, certainly. But is Milly Theale really superior to Isabel Archer? The cracked golden bowl in the later novel is a richer and subtler symbol than Roderick Hudson's statue of 'Thirst' in the earlier. But the imagery which evokes Prince Amerigo in *The Golden Bowl* as a Palladian church, and the much-extolled symbol of the Pagoda – Maggie Verver's vision of the relationships of the four major characters – colourful as these may be in their own terms, are really not convincing vehicles for their human analogies. The overwrought inadequacy of the images is only one measure of the inadequacy of the novel as a whole, and suggests that in James's fiction symbolism and imagery are not determining causes – as they often are in poetry – but elements of great but secondary value for enriching, substantiating, and more closely defining other fictional elements. If the Pagoda image is dazzling, it is also contrived, over-extended, and finally false to the human value it represents. Significantly, the reader can see the same dazzling but false qualities working in the novel as a whole.

One other technical matter is worth mentioning in tracing James's development. The burden that James places on the *ficelle* – the friendly confidant who is involved only marginally in the action – becomes heavier in the later fiction. Borrowed from the drama, from the conventions of chorus and *confidante*, these persons are messengers and expositors. They elicit information and feelings. As James tries to push his fiction ever closer to the conditions of drama (and it is interesting that James's 'drama' almost inevitably means French classical drama), the *ficelle* becomes more and more important, and sometimes irritatingly obtrusive. Susan Stringham in *The Wings of the Dove*, and Fanny Assingham in *The Golden Bowl*, are too vocal. On the other hand, Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors* helps to mark the superiority of this novel by being worked into the fabric of the action so well that it is no longer possible to dismiss her as belonging to the manner and not the matter of the novel, according to James's own definition of the *ficelle*.⁷

The style of the late novels, however mannered, is at its best rich in meaning and highly evocative. It is constantly made

⁷ Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. xxi.

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Alwyn Berland

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Culture and conduct in the novels of Henry James*

concrete by rich images and elaborate metaphors, presenting to the reader a simultaneous awareness of the feelings and intentions of several characters at any given moment. Remarkable too is the attempt to contain within narrative prose not only each possibility of motivation and reaction, each nuance of feeling, but also each consequent look and motion and gesture.⁸ I speak of the style as analytical in the sense that it probes deeper and deeper into the elaborate and complex wholeness of feeling and thought which underlines each step of developing action, until finally the completely seen moral nature of the individual emerges as it is defined and experienced in its relationships with others. The result is a structure which is dramatic in form, but with an essentially poetic, and lyrical, density of effect.

What may well have marked a cyclical return to favour of the earlier works was begun with the argument of F. R. Leavis for *The Portrait of a Lady*. He considered it not only superior to the later novels, but, indeed, the greatest of all novels in English. He placed *The Bostonians* second.⁹ His thesis was that the late novels suffer from *too* much technique and too little idea, an 'excess of doing' and a consequent weakening of content, although Leavis tended rather more to insist than to demonstrate. But the weighing of such alternative claims is not after all my immediate concern. In the end, the choice between early and late James may well be as false as an insistence that one must choose, absolutely, between Beethoven's 'Waldstein' and the Opus 111 piano sonatas. I prefer to rejoice in the existence of both.

THE IDEA OF CIVILIZATION

Because so much has been written about James, early and late, the task of investigating his fiction without preconceptions is a difficult one. What stands behind many attempts to do so, moreover, is James's own ambiguously intended fable, 'The

⁸ See P. N. Furbank, 'Henry James: the novelist as actor', *Essays in Criticism*, 1 (1951), pp. 404–20.

⁹ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London, 1948), p. 153.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The major theme*

9

Figure in the Carpet', which defies the critic to find the thread, or pattern, in a life's work which will explain *All*. The challenge may have been a good one to the degree that it has invited discussion and controversy, but it has certainly been a bad one in that it has suggested the availability of a single overriding formula. All writers can be reduced to a formula, no doubt; but no great writer can suffer the process without damage to his very greatness. Such formulas must be either so large and general ('Appearance and reality'; 'The redemptive role of work') as to prove useless, if not nonsensical; or so complex and conditioned as to challenge the very conception of formula.

Nevertheless, it is possible without resort to formula to identify James's created world and to define the frame of reference which gives it coherence and meaning. I do not speak of *theme* in the usual critical sense, but of the writer's significant personal vision of experience. I refer to that which sustains the creation of literary works and survives the conditions of their creation, whether those of the life of the writer or the circumstances of his age which gave rise to them. They survive because they continue to speak authentically about the human condition through their own distinctive fusions of intelligence, and fullness of feeling, and aesthetic mastery. Such works we come to call classics. They become so largely through their conceptions, though any conception is available only through technique. The technique realizes – makes real – the conception. Without the technical mastery there are simply the problematic claims for the mute inglorious Miltons.

James's eyes were fixed firmly on finite and mortal men living in a finite social world. His rare upward questionings were tentative and inconclusive. Moralistic as he was, his vision was altogether secular and mundane. He was neither explorer nor anthropologist, and he cared little for the primitive or the unknown.¹⁰ His concern with man was not cosmic, in the sense

¹⁰ See for instance his letter to R. L. Stevenson: 'Primitive man doesn't interest me, I confess, as much as civilized . . .' (*Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James*, ed. Janet Adam Smith (London, 1948), pp. 228–9). The bland understatement is determined by the fact that James was writing to a friend who was devoting himself to the primitive, and should not disguise the very great distance between their commitments.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Culture and conduct in the novels of Henry James*

that, say, Hardy's or Conrad's was; his concern was local and social. Not man-in-the-universe but man-in-society was his consistent subject. The highly civilized eighteenth century was fond of looking to the East – or rather to its own imagination of the East – for formulas of Nature and of Wisdom. James stayed inside his own civilization and looked for them there. How he saw his own civilization is what I intend to demonstrate later on. Now it is enough to say that he loved Europe as the repository of Western civilization. He saw America as a recent and tentative addition. He saw no other. So enamoured of this civilization was he that he could not conceive of a better medium for man's existence, unless indeed it were that same civilization made better still, closer, that is, to the ideal which it suggested than to the actuality which so often disappointed expectation. His fiction constitutes a major attempt to think out such an ideal civilization and to ponder its effects on the men and women who might live in it. His investigation of its corruptions and compromises demonstrates his recognition of the negative elements in the actual; his continued commitment to the principle of civilization proves his loyalty to the ideal.

His fictional treatment of civilization is in part actual, in part ideal. His characters are made to match. Once given the desire to exalt a high civilization into a higher one still, it is more understandable that his characters should *begin* very high as well. Otherwise, the reaches to which they aspire would become impossible. The 'campaign . . . on behalf of the something better . . . that blessedly, as it is assumed, *might* be', by which he justifies his idealized human beings, is just the campaign for civilization, and for the civilized, which for James became the Highest Good.

The highest good for James is not, strictly speaking, a state of society so much as a condition of human development in which certain qualities can flower and thrive, in which cultivated sensibility and moral integrity give men what he calls 'the power to be finely aware and richly responsible'.¹¹ These qualities are individual, of course, but they require the medium

11 Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, p. ix.