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Alwyn Berland

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CULTURE AND CONDUCT IN
THE NOVELS OF HENRY JAMES

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Preface

This is a study of Henry James's fiction in relationship to his particular view of civilization as culture. I believe this view was of great importance in determining his treatment of the novelist's material: human beings in their relations with each other, with their societies and institutions, and with themselves. His view of civilization affected a number of his characteristic fictional themes and concerns, and I think it important to demonstrate their connections.

The artist's vision of human experience affects not only his themes, of course, but with equal significance his forms and techniques, insofar as they serve to organize and to render meaningful the experience with which he deals. I shall not discuss in any comprehensive way the distinctive technical achievements of James's fiction; I think this omission justified not only on the grounds of the considerable body of formal criticism already in existence, but also because of the concentration of focus of my study. I have dealt with technical matters whenever I feel them to bear particularly on my central subject.

The ideas developed here stem from my reading of the novels themselves. Although more than one critic has observed before now that James cared intensely for civilization, no critic I have read has developed this idea adequately or, more important, demonstrated its permeating effects on James's fiction.

I am not particularly concerned with the bearings of James's biography on his novels, and the biography itself has already been well documented. I have thought it important to think afresh about the tradition, or traditions, in which James's work was founded; to that degree this study is concerned with literary and social history. My concern is not with James's specific debts

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and borrowings, which are comparatively few, but with his concerns and commitments, which are many.

I begin with a general discussion of James's concern with civilization, and with his tendency to see civilization primarily as culture, rather than as a wider social, historical, institutional (and cultural) construct. I am interested in demonstrating that James's dependence on a nineteenth-century aesthetic tradition is larger than has previously been recognized. This aesthetic movement, especially as it found expression in the writings of Matthew Arnold, seems to me most helpful in defining and in understanding James's own commitments and the framework of his fiction.

I go on to consider a number of representative themes and motifs in James's fiction in the light of his central vision of civilization as culture. Then I turn to a consideration of those novels which seem to me most interesting both in themselves and as illuminating James's most characteristic and important themes.

I begin with James's first novel, *Roderick Hudson*, which stakes out, if with some immaturity, James's central and recurring subjects. In it I find opportunity for considering some important questions about the literary traditions most significant in shaping James's own literary career.

I have given a large part of my argument to a close study of *The Portrait of a Lady*. The intrinsic merit of the novel justifies this attention, I believe; further, it provides the best single occasion for an examination of James's view of civilization as culture as it affected his art. Readers who agree with my treatment of this novel will find that it illuminates many others as well.

The Portrait of a Lady treats the idea of civilization directly, and richly, through the strategy of the international theme. A second, less central approach which James explored for dealing with his interests is the dramatic confrontation of different attitudes toward, or conceptions of, civilization. Views which are alternative or hostile to his own are given fictional voice through various characters whose attitudes and behaviour may be examined for their consequences. James's conception of

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civilization was a minority view, held in the face of stronger and more popular claims, the errors or inadequacies of which James wished to expose to fictional demonstration. *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, and *The Tragic Muse* are all novels in which James tests or defends his own special feelings about civilization in relation to other views. These novels are the major works which follow after *The Portrait of a Lady*, where James's own ideas and commitments to civilization as culture are most fully developed and explored.

James returned to the international theme and to his central concern in *The Ambassadors*, but with the added complexity of vision and of style that justifies the usual grouping of late novels. Furthermore, certain ideas always present in James became more important in the late novels: for example, the themes of acquisition, of appropriation, of the 'modern love of things'. For this reason, I have related my discussion of *The Ambassadors* to *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ivory Tower*. I have not included *The Wings of the Dove*, however much I might welcome an occasion for discussing both its marvels and its lapses. For while James deals with the theme of civilization in it, again on the international level, the novel adds nothing and changes nothing that is relevant to my concern in this study.

There remains a large group of novels which are peripheral to my subject, though they include in their number some very good works. I have not undertaken to discuss these except incidentally where there is some special relevance to my central argument. In some of these novels James is interested in describing and evaluating single elements of the civilization which he finds in moving between America and Europe and which in themselves are incomplete or fragmentary. *The Europeans*, a very good novel, and *The Reverberator*, a much slighter work altogether, are both examples of this more limited treatment. Other novels look at the manners and conventions of the society of his own time which, satirically or tragically, he examined for their effects on the lives of his characters. The early *Washington Square* and the later *The Awkward Age* and *What Maisie Knew* all look at the impact on culture and on conduct of the manners of his age.

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I should not like to suggest that James was occupied in constructing a systematic study of civilization, working out definitions, noting exceptions, labelling attributes, and all the rest. There is no conscious organization of an over-all pattern in James's novels such as, for instance, one finds in Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*, or even in the looser organization of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels and stories. James did have a central vision of the importance of civilization and its bearings on the human condition, a vision which informed his representative themes, actions, characters, techniques. This is quite a different matter, however, from a conscious plan or organization. Indeed, in approaching the creative impulse, which so often laughs at diagrams and which confounds the critic's schema, it is well to remember the words in which Lambert Strether pays his high tribute to Mme de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors*:

he felt the roughness of the formula, because, by one of the short-cuts of genius, she had taken all his categories by surprise.

I have used the New York edition of James's fiction, and the Macmillan edition of 1923, as my texts. The latter includes all the fiction published in James's lifetime which for one reason or another was omitted from the New York edition. I have not given page references in the body of this study for the innumerable quotations from the novels; to do so, I felt, would be too tedious and distracting for the reader. References are given for all material drawn from James's criticism, notebooks, letters, and autobiographical volumes, as well as for material derived from secondary sources.

Parts of this study have appeared, in somewhat modified versions, in *The University Review*, *The Cambridge Journal*, *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, and *The Wascana Review*. I acknowledge with thanks their permission to reproduce this material here.

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Finally, I wish to acknowledge the largest debt of all, in more ways than I can possibly say, to my wife Jayne Berland.

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What are the conditions that produce a classical national author. He must, in the first place, be born in a great commonwealth . . . He must find his nation in a high state of civilization, so that he will have no difficulty in obtaining for himself a high degree of culture. He must find much material already collected and ready for his use, and a large number of more or less perfect attempts made by his predecessors. And finally, there must be such a happy conjuncture of outer and inner circumstances that he will not have to pay dearly for his mistakes, but that in the prime of his life he may be able to see the possibilities of a great theme and to develop it according to some uniform plan into a well-arranged and well-constructed literary work.

Goethe

I can't look at the English-American world, or feel about them, any more, save as a big Anglo-Saxon total, destined to such an amount of melting together that an insistence on their differences becomes more and more idle and pedantic; and that melting together will come the faster the more one takes it for granted and treats the life of the two countries as continuous and more or less convertible, or at any rate as simply different chapters of the same general subject. Literature, fiction in particular, affords a magnificent arm for such taking for granted, and one may so do an excellent work with it. I have not the least hesitation in saying that I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible to an outsider to say whether I am at a given moment an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as I do with both countries,) and so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized.

Henry James