THE PORTABLE

HENRY JAMES

EDITED, AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY

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INTRODUCTION

Henry James once spoke of how “the private history of any sincere work . . . looms with its own completeness.” In another place he wrote that “the figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations. . . . Their being finely aware—as Hamlet and Lear, say, are finely aware—makes absolutely the intensity of their adventure, gives the maximum of sense to what befalls them.”

On both occasions James was defining principles for the art to which he devoted his entire life—the art of fiction. But it is safe to say that he also spoke with conscious reference to himself, to his own adventure in the eventful age he witnessed and his own way of turning it to account. The world of readers and critics was slow to admit the intensity of that adventure or to recognize the “maximum of sense” James gave it. His private history was not of the kind that “looms large” with the dramatic capacities in action or passion that have made a whole host of modern writers—from Goethe, Byron, and Dostoevski to Rimbaud, Yeats, Lawrence, and Lorca—vivid figures in the mythology of the human spirit. Outwardly viewed, his career was unspectacular. It was the art and mind by which he enriched it that made it a great life and that continue to make James one of
the most interesting figures in the drama of the past century.

Henry James was born on April 15, 1843, in Washington Place in New York City. Fifty years earlier his Irish grandfather had come to America where he established himself in trade in several cities of New York state, prospered handsomely, married three times, and when he died in 1832 left a fortune of three million dollars to his children. By his third wife he had a son called Henry, who rebelled against assuming the family business and devoted himself instead to the study of religion, philosophy, and humanity. This son married at the age of thirty, and four sons and a daughter were born to him and his wife, the oldest son being called William after his grandfather, the second Henry, after his father. In 1848 these two infants were taken across the Atlantic by their parents to spend part of a year in France and England, but the family returned to America and during the next ten years the children received their early schooling in New York and Albany. They were back in Europe in 1855 for three years, and again in 1859 for one. There Henry James went to schools in Switzerland, France, England, and Germany and discovered his passion for books and writing. Back in Newport in 1860 he tried studying painting, gave it up, attended the Harvard Law School briefly, gave it up, lived with his family in Cambridge, began to meet literary men like Charles Eliot Norton, James Russell Lowell, and William Dean Howells, resolved to become a writer, began his public career with a review in the North American in 1864 and a story in the Atlantic Monthly in 1865, and in another ten years had his first book of tales ready for publication.

Meanwhile his love of travel took him to Europe on his first adult journey in 1869 and on two further trips during the following six years. He studied the French theater at the Comédie Française; he put himself to school among the literary circles of Paris and London, forming friendships with Turgenev, Flaubert, Renan, Zola, Daudet, George Eliot, Ruskin, Morris, Tennyson, Browning, Gladstone, Morley, and other public figures in both countries; he explored Italy, Germany, France, and England. By 1876 he had established himself permanently in London, and he continued to live there and in Sussex for the rest of his life. His books—novels, tales, critical essays, accounts of travel—appeared in increasing numbers year by year. Success came early, and at least twice—with Daisy Miller in 1879 and The Portrait of a Lady in 1881—he knew public celebrity; but gradually his novels fell into public and critical disfavor. For five years, from 1890 to 1895, he devoted himself to making a success in the theater, but this effort ended in failure. He resumed the writing of fiction, produced a long series of books of increasing subtlety and originality; cultivated a great host of friends; revisited America after an absence of twenty-one years in 1904 and rediscovered his native land as a famous man; revised his major fictions for a handsome collected edition; again tried writing for the theater, again unsuccessfully; came back to America in 1910 with his dying brother William; returned to England; witnessed the outbreak of war in 1914 with shock and anguish; wrote a series of memoirs of his early years; tried to resume the writing of novels; became a British citizen in 1915 as a sign of loyalty to his adopted country; was taken ill in his seventy-third year; received England's Order of Merit on his deathbed; and died in February 1916.

It was a life which, apart from deep family affections, many devoted friendships, many travels, a few high mo-
moral disorder into which the world has fallen, by the prolonged crisis and sense of disintegrating traditions in which we have come to live. We see in him, by a species of retrospective logic, what men have always seen in their image-makers and heroes of form—what Santayana meant when he said, defining Froust's achievement, that "Life as it flows is so much time wasted, and that nothing can ever be recovered or truly possessed save under the form of eternity, which is also ... the form of art."

The revival of James has bred its excesses of cult and sanctimony. They come partly from a natural pride—notably an American pride—in reclaiming the books that were for many years disputed or rejected by critics of many schools and prejudices: by realists, by patriarchs, by skeptics of culture, by reformers of society, by proletarians, all of whom combined to make the public forget that James had his faithful if limited audience through fifty years; that his tales and novels were printed in magazines on a scale that has become incredible in our own boasted age of literary freedom and experiment; that he met positive defeat only once—in his efforts to become a successful dramatist—and turned even that drastic disappointment to the advantage of his real work in fiction; and that his fellow writers had granted him the title of "Master." His critics preferred to charge him with most of the sins in the literary and American calendars—with repudiating his birthright, with being a snob, with falling indecisively between two cultures and finding himself at home in neither, with evading a full commitment to life, with accepting only the values of privilege and aristocracy, with excluding a great share of human misery and injustice from serious consideration. He was accused of being the "culmination of the superficial type," a man who "doesn't find things out" and so produces "tales of nothingness"; of being "a fat, wistful remittance man with a passion for elegance"; of having "never succeeded in coming to grips with life"; of creating "the impassioned formalism of an art without content"; of "magnificent pretensions, petty performances—the fruits of an irresponsible imagination, of a deranged sense of values, of a mind working in the void, uncorrected by any clear consciousness of human cause and effect"; even, finally, of being "simply not interesting: he is only intelligent; he has no mystery in him, no secret; no Figure in the Carpet."

This long bill of particulars includes some arguments with which every serious reader of James must eventually deal, but the verdict is now, on the whole, a very different one. As early as 1918 one of James's most perceptive followers had made bold to call him "the most intelligent man of his generation," and today critics of resolute astuteness and of radically different standards attest his distinction. "Henry James is a great artist, in spite of everything," says one of them; "his work is incomplete as his experience was; but it is in no respect second-rate, and he can be judged only in the company of the greatest." Another, asking only that he be permitted to define the novel in a way "neither difficult nor illegitimate," has said he would "be inclined to consider James as the greatest novelist in English, as he is certainly one of the five or six greatest writers of any variety to be produced in North America." A third has called James "a man who, if he had never written a novel, would be considered the first of short-story writ-

* The critics quoted are H. G. Wells (in Boon, 1915), Burton Rascoe, Somerset Maugham, J. Middleton Murry, Van Wyck Brooks (in The Pilgrimage of Henry James, 1925), and André Gide.
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ers, and if he had never written a short story, the noblest of letter writers, and if he had never written anything would by his talk alone be known as a great man." A fourth has flatly asked, "What achievement in the art of fiction—fiction as a completely serious art addressed to the adult mind—can we point to in English as surpassing his?" 1

When controversy, enthusiasm, personal legend, and historic occasion combine in the rediscovery of a writer and make of it a significant episode in the history of taste, it is clear that he constitutes what James himself would have called a "special type"—that he was marked by circumstances as well as genius to play a significant role in the drama of culture. James held a high opinion of the artist's right to such a role. "To do something great" of which "the world shall hear" was one of his earliest ambitions. Once, in the earlier days of his conquest of England, he was a guest of Lord Rosebery and his Rothschild wife amid the splendors of Mentmore. "I have retired from the glittering scene, to meditate by my bedroom fire on the fleeting character of earthly possessions," he wrote home to his mother in America. "Tomorrow I return to London and to my personal occupation, always doubly valued after 48 hours among ces gens-ci, whose chief effect upon me is to sharpen my desire to distinguish myself by personal achievement, of however limited a character." The desire for fame and power, that "sense of glory" which had struck him in boyhood like a revelation in the Galerie d'Apollon in the Louvre, possessed him even though he felt the peril it entailed. He would certainly have agreed with what one of his contemporaries, Gerard Manley Hopkins, then wholly unknown to literature, once wrote in a letter to Robert Bridges: that "fame, the being known, though in itself one of the most dangerous things to man, is nevertheless the true and appointed air, element, and setting of genius and its works. What are works of art for? to educate, to be standards. Education is meant for the many, standards are for public use. To produce then is of little use unless what we produce is known, if known widely known, the wider known the better, for it is by being known it works, it influences, it does its duty, it does good. We must then try to be known, aim at it, take means to it." 2

What James aimed at in his art, what means he took to provide a standard for the use and education of men, what tests and scruples he met in the effort, and by what means his purposes were finally vindicated—all this makes his career one of the dramatic chapters in modern literature, and permits him to loom large in a way that has become a lesson in the persistence and integrity of the writer's vocation. But because James was a man who, contrary to a still-surviving derogation, did not live or work unaware of his role in history, it has become something more.

1 The critics quoted here are T. S. Eliot in The Little Review, August 1918; Edmund Wilson in The Triple Thinkers (1938); Yvor Winters in Maule's Curse (1939); Cyril Connolly in Horizon, May 1943; F. R. Leavis in The Great Tradition (1948).

2 James published his first tale in 1865, when he was twenty-two years old. That date, in the career of an American, acts as an initial signal. The Civil War had just ended. The American nation, like James himself, stood at the threshold of a new age. Her literature had already passed through its successive formative phases. Each of them had found a man, some of them several
The worth of an art "civilized" in James's sense was not a matter of common acceptance when James wrote those sentences, and it is ceasing to be so in various quarters today. Literature, like life itself, is again being reclaimed by prejudice and force. Having passed through a great period of experiment and sophistication, it is once more called upon to declare positions, judgments, decisions; to revert to crudity or didacticism in order to serve the uses of social justice; to become partisan, political, or engaged. That demand continues to support the argument that James's work is a symptom of the casuistry, ambiguity, and equivocation that have undermined society and incurred its disasters. Thus the long-standing complaints about "a mind working in the void, uncorrected by any clear consciousness of human cause and effect," "an art without content," an inability "to come to grips with life."

They are complaints which, lodged against a minor part of his work, have a certain relevance, but they cannot stand against the weight and solidity of his whole achievement. James must be read, and read in his entirety; read not with the demand that he be another Tolstoi, Dostoevski, or Melville, or even a Balzac or Dickens, but because he had his own unique contribution to make to the art of fiction and made it in a way that proves him as much a moral historian as any of these, even when he fell short of their final range and eloquence.

It may be allowed that the lengths of subtlety, analysis, and density to which James carried his craft can, if we do not follow him far enough, obscure the laws on which he based it. A factor of contrivance or calcu-
nated by the difference between "a given appearance and a taken meaning," and obviously this difference, pushed far enough, can produce a disproportion between fact and illusion, substance and ratiocination, manners and morals, which is likely to end in casuistry and moral enigma.

These are the serious grounds of Jamesian criticism. What seems clear to the present writer is that James established his certain mastery in the books of his so-called "middle period." That great sequence begins with the concise perfection of Washington Square, continues through The Portrait of a Lady (possibly the touchstone of his entire achievement, with its shapeliness and movement as of fine music and its superbly controlled sympathy and justice) and his two masterpieces of social drama, The Bostonians and The Princess Casamassima, and is rounded out by the brilliant nouvelle of the nineties, to reach its climax in such searching studies of human and ethical values as What Maisie Knew and The Spoils of Poynton.

Yet given James's gifts and purpose, it is impossible to expect him to have rested with the achievements of those astonishing twenty years. The momentum of his vision was incapable of stopping at that point. He had earned his right to carry his art into the poetic and metaphysical risks of his final period, particularly when that period produced the rich qualities of The Wings of the Dove (whatever the dramatic frailty of its nebulous heroine, certainly his highest point in delicacy of moral criticism), the profound ethical reverberation of The Golden Bowl, and that phenomenal revival of his powers as a critic of society, The Ivory Tower. The Ambassadors may show too arbitrary a schematization; The Outcry and The Sense of the Past may err in the direction of abstraction; but the final phase of James's work brought the modern novel into a greater sense of its moral and imaginative possibilities than any other work of the early twentieth century. And in spite of his increasing addiction to obsessive themes and subjective treatment, the vigorous recuperation of realism in The Ivory Tower shows how genuinely he was sustained to the end of his life by the principles he adopted in early maturity and how these gave him a creative longevity, a persistence in imaginative invention, that is virtually unique in the history of fiction.

Those principles animate his work as a critic; they are condensed in his most famous essay, "The Art of Fiction." James was not a formal critic, and it is doubtful true that he wrote brilliant criticism without being a "great" critic. He never formulated an organic aesthetic; he did not investigate classical literature, not even English and French; he had little skill in the theory and appreciation of poetry. R. P. Blackmur has said that he never arrived at "a relation to the whole body of literature" such as we find in Johnson, Coleridge, Sainte-Beuve, Arnold, and Elliot. Instead he worked empirically, pursuing consistently only his special interests in fiction and drama. But within these limits he showed an integrity of interest that was tireless, and he produced the most coherent study of a chosen craft by a practicing craftsman that we have in English. His essays rival Baudelaire's in their continuous relevance to actual creation and to the origins of such creation in the artist's mind and sensibility.

His emphasis is often on devices, on what he called "doing," at that time a major problem in his craft. Thus the attention he gave to the "grammar" of fiction—to such matters as "the point of view," "scene" and "dramatizing" ("Dramatize! dramatize!"), plotting and motivation, ficelles and dispoibles, problems of inclusion and