HOUND & HORN

Henry James

APRIL : JUNE 1934 ONE DOLLAR

The Ambiguity of Henry James

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A DISCUSSION of Henry James's ambiguity may appropriately begin with *The Turn of the Screw*. This story, which seems to have proved more fascinating to the general reading public than anything else of James's except *Daisy Miller*, apparently conceals another mystery behind the ostensible one. I do not know who first propounded the theory; but Miss Edna Kenton, whose insight into James is profound, has been one of its principal elucidators, and Mr. Charles Demuth has done a set of illustrations based on it.

According to this interpretation, the young governess who tells the story is a neurotic case of sex repression, and the ghosts are not real ghosts at all but merely the governess's hallucinations.

Let us go through the story from the beginning. It opens with an introduction. The man who is presenting the governess's manuscript tells us first who she is. She is the youngest daughter of a poor country parson, who had come up to London and answered an advertisement and found a man who wanted a governess for his orphaned nephew and niece. "This prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage." It is made clear that the young woman

has become thoroughly infatuated with her employer. He is charming to her and lets her have the job on condition that she will never bother him about the children; and she goes down to the house in the country where they are staying with a housekeeper and some other servants.

The boy, she finds, has been sent home from school for reasons into which she does not inquire but which she colors, on no evidence at all so far as one can see, with a significance somehow sinister; she learns that the former governess left, and that she has since died, under circumstances which are not explained but which are made to seem ominous in the same way. She is alone with the illiterate housekeeper, a good and simple soul, and the children, who seem innocent and charming. As she wanders about the estate, she often thinks how delightful it would be to come suddenly round the corner and find that the master had arrived: he would be smiling, approving, handsome.

She is never to meet her employer again, but what she does meet are the apparitions. One day when his face has been in her mind, she comes out in sight of the house and sees the figure of a man on the tower, a figure which is not the master's. Not long afterwards, the figure appears again, toward the end of a rainy Sunday. She sees him at closer range and more clearly: he is wearing smart clothes but is not a gentleman. The housekeeper, meeting the governess immediately afterwards, behaves as if the governess herself were a ghost: "I wondered why she should be scared." The governess tells her about the apparition and learns that it answers the description of one of the master's valets who had stayed down there and used to wear his clothes. The valet had been a bad character, who used "to play with the boy . . . to spoil him"; he had been found dead, having slipped on the ice coming out of a public house: it is impossible to say that he was not murdered. The governess believes that he has come back to haunt the children.

Not long afterwards, she and the little girl are out on the shore of a lake, the little girl playing, the governess sewing. The latter becomes aware of a third person on the opposite side of the lake. But she looks first at the little girl, who is turning her back in that direction, and who, she notes, has "picked up a small flat piece of wood, which happened to have in it a little hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast and make the thing a boat. This second morsel, as I watched her, she was very markedly and intently attempting to tighten in its place." This somehow "sustains" the governess so that she is able to raise her eyes: she sees a woman "in black, pale and dreadful". She concludes that it is the former governess. Her predecessor, the housekeeper intimates, though a lady, had had an affair with the valet. The boy had used to go away with the valet and then lie about it afterwards. The governess concludes that the boy must have known about the valet and the woman—the children have been corrupted by them.

Observe that there is never any evidence that anybody but the governess sees the ghosts. She believes that the children see them but there is never any proof that they do. The housekeeper insists that she does not see them; it is apparently the governess who frightens her. The children, too, become hysterical; but this is evidently the governess's doing, too. Observe, also, from the Freudian point of view, the significance of the governess's interest in the little girl's pieces of wood and of the fact that the male apparition first appears on a tower and the female apparition on a lake. There seems to be only a single circumstance which does not fit into the hypothesis that the ghosts are hallucinations of the governess: the fact that the governess's description of the first ghost at a time when she has never heard of the valet should be identifiable by the housekeeper. But when we look back, we see that even this has been left open to a

double interpretation. The governess has never heard of the valet, but it has been suggested to her in a conversation with the housekeeper that there has been some other male somewhere about who "liked every one young and pretty", and the idea of this other person has been ambiguously confused with the master and with the master's interest in her, the present governess. The master has never been described; we have merely been told that he was "handsome." Of the ghost, who is described in detail, we are told that he has "straight, good features," and he is wearing the master's clothes.

The governess continues to see the spirits, and the atmosphere becomes more and more hysterical. She believes that the children get up at night to meet them, though they are able to give plausible explanations of their behavior. The children become obviously uncomfortable; they begin to resent the governess. The boy begs to be sent to another school and threatens to write to his uncle, and the girl, under the governess's pressure to make her admit that Miss Jessel is haunting her, breaks down and demands to be sent away.

The governess is now left alone with the boy. A gruesome scene ensues. "We continued silent while the maid was with us—as silent, it whimsically occurred to me, as some young couple who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy in the presence of the waiter." When the maid has gone, and she presses him to tell her why he was expelled from school, the boy seems suddenly afraid of her. He finally confesses that he "said things"—to "a few", to "those he liked". It all sounds very harmless: there comes to her out of her "very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent. It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he *were* innocent, what then on earth was *I*? "The valet appears at the window—it is "the white face of damnation". (But is the governess condemning the spirits to damnation or is she becoming damned herself?) She is aware that the

boy does not see it. "No more, no more, no more!" she shrieks to the apparition. "Is she *here*?" asks the boy in panic (he has heard from his sister the incident of the governess's trying to make her admit she has seen Miss Jessel). No, she says, it is not the woman; "But it's at the window—straight before us. It's *there*!" . . . "It's *he*?" then. Whom does he mean by "he"? " 'Peter Quint—you devil!' His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication. 'Where?' " "What does he matter now, my own?" she cries. "What will he *ever* matter? *I* have you, but he has lost you forever!" Then she shows him that the figure has vanished: "There, *there*!" she says, pointing toward the window. He looks and gives a cry; she feels that he is dead in her arms. From her point of view, the disappearance of the spirit has proved too terrible a shock for him and "his little heart, dispossessed, has stopped"; but if we study the dialogue from the other point of view, we see that he must have taken her "There, *there*!" as an answer to his own "*Where?*" She has finally made him believe either that he has actually seen something or that he is on the point of seeing something. He gives "the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss". She has literally frightened him to death.

When one has once been given this clue to *The Turn of the Screw*, one wonders how one could ever have missed it. There is a very good reason, however, in the fact that nowhere does James unequivocally give the thing away: everything from beginning to end can be taken equally well in either of two senses. In the preface to the collected edition, however, as Miss Kenton has pointed out, James does seem to want to put himself on record. He asserts here that *The Turn of the Screw* is "a fairy-tale pure and simple"—but adds that the apparitions are of the order of those involved in witchcraft cases rather than of those in cases of psychic research. And he goes on to tell of his reply to one of his readers who had complained that he had not characterized

the governess sufficiently. At this criticism, he says, "One's artistic, one's *ironic* heart shook for the instant almost to breaking"; and he answered: "It was 'déjà très-joli' . . . please believe, the general proposition of our young woman's keeping crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities—*by which I don't of course mean her explanation of them, a different matter.* . . . She has 'authority', which is a good deal to have given her" . . . The italics above are mine: these words seem impossible to explain except on the hypothesis I have suggested. And note, too, in the collected edition that James has not included *The Turn of the Screw* in the volume with the other ghost stories but in another volume between *The Aspern Papers* and *The Liar*—this last the story of a pathological liar whose wife protects his lies against the world, behaving with the same sort of deceptive "authority" as the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*. When we look back at the story in the light of these hints, we can conceive that the whole thing has been primarily and completely a characterization of the governess: her visions and the way she behaves about them become as soon as we look at them from the obverse side, a solid and unmistakable picture of the poor country parson's daughter, with her English middle-class class-consciousness, her inability to admit to herself her sexual impulses and the relentless English "authority" which enables her to put over on inferiors even purposes which are totally mistaken and not at all to the other people's best interests.

The Turn of the Screw, then, on this theory, would be a masterpiece—not as a ghost story, there are a great many better ones of the ordinary kind—but as a study in morbid psychology. It is to this psychological value of the ghosts, I believe, that the story owes its fascination: it belongs with *Moby Dick* and the *Alice* books to a small group of fairy tales whose symbols exert a peculiar power by reason of the fact that they have behind them, whether or not the authors are aware of it, a profound grasp of subconscious processes.

And when we examine the story in this light, we understand for the first time its significance in connection with Henry James's other fiction—for the first time, because on any other hypothesis *The Turn of the Screw* would be, so far as I remember, the only story James ever wrote which did not have some more or less serious point. We see now that it is simply a variation on one of James's familiar themes: the frustrated Anglo-Saxon spinster; and we remember that he presents other cases of women who deceive themselves and others about the sources and character of their emotions. The most obvious example is that remarkable and too little read novel *The Bostonians*. The subject of *The Bostonians* is the struggle for the attractive daughter of a poor evangelist between a young man from the South who wants to marry her and a well-to-do Boston lady with a Lesbian passion for her. The strong-minded and strong-willed spinster is herself entirely in the dark as to the real source of her interest in the girl: she is convinced that her desire to dominate her, to make her live with her, to teach her to make speeches on women's rights, to prevent the eligible young Southerner from marrying her, is a zeal to advance the cause of Feminism. But James does not leave the reader in doubt—and he presents Olive Chancellor in the setting of various other representatives of other phases of New England idealism who are explained on similar principles.

It must certainly have been due partly to this theme, so inacceptable to the American readers of the eighties, that *The Bostonians* was such a discouraging failure. Richard Watson Gilder, the editor of *The Century Magazine*, in which the novel was first brought out as a serial, told James that it was the most unpopular feature which had ever appeared in the magazine; and I have heard an editor relate as one of the awful legends of the magazine business how,

as the grisly and uncomfortable story of Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant unfolded itself at relentless length (to be sure, it ran a year and a half)—the subscribers "died off like flies". William James, at an early point in the serial, wrote his brother an indignant letter in which he took him to task for having caricatured, in Miss Birdseye, the Boston humanitarian, a respected old friend of the family (though William afterwards applauded the book); and even years later when Henry James was selecting the material for his collected edition, he was forced by the insistence of his publishers—one supposes that W. C. Brownell was responsible—and against his own inclination, to exclude *The Bostonians* from it. This unfavorable reception in the States of his most ambitious American novel seems to have embittered James; and it may also have made him timid, so that he afterwards stepped more carefully when he approached such subjects as that of *The Turn of the Screw*.

And there is a theme of the same kind in the short story called *The Marriages*, which amused Robert Louis Stevenson so hugely. But here the treatment is comic. A young English girl, described by one of the characters as of the unmarriageable type, much attached to an attractive father and obsessed by the memory of a dead mother, breaks up her father's projected second marriage. She goes to his fiancée and tells her that her father is an impossible character who made her late mother miserable. When her brother calls her a raving maniac, she remains serene in the conviction that, by ruining the happiness of her father, she has been loyal to her duty to her mother.

James's world is full of these women. They are not always emotionally perverted. Sometimes they are emotionally apathetic—like the amusing Francie Dosson of *The Reverberator*, who, though men are always falling madly in love with her, seems never really to understand what courtship and marriage mean and is apparently quite content to go on all

her life eating marrons glacés with her father and sister in the parlor of the Paris hotel. Sometimes they are emotionally starved—like the pathetic Milly Theale of *The Wings of the Dove*, who wastes away in Venice and whose doctor recommends a lover.

II

James's men are not precisely neurotic; but they are the masculine counterparts of his women. They have a way of missing out on emotional experience, either through timidity and caution or through heroic renunciation.

The extreme and fantastic example is the hero of *The Beast in the Jungle*, who is finally crushed by the realization that his fate is to be the man in the whole world to whom nothing at all is to happen. Sometimes these characters are presented ironically: the cagy Mr. Wentworth of *The Europeans*, so smug and secure in his neat little house, deciding not to marry the agreeable baroness who has proved such an upsetting element in the community, is a perfect comic portrait of a certain kind of Bostonian. Sometimes he makes them sympathetic: the weary Lambert Strether, of *The Ambassadors*, who comes to Paris too late in life.

Sometimes, however, the effect is ambiguous. Though the element of irony in Henry James is often underestimated by his readers, there are stories which leave us in doubt as to whether or not the author knew that the heroes would seem unsympathetic. Is the fishy Bernard Longueville of the early novel *Confidence* really a sensitive and interesting young man or is he a prig in the manner of Jane Austen? And some of James's later heroes seem as bad, or worse. The very late short story *Flickerbridge*, in which a young American painter decides not to marry a young newspaper

woman (the men are always deciding *not* to marry the women in Henry James) because he is afraid she will spoil by publicizing it a delightful old English house connected with her own family in which he has greatly enjoyed living without her, affects us in the same slightly unpleasant way. *Flickerbridge* manages to be even more inhuman than H. G. Wells's parody of this inhuman side of James in *Boon*.

But *Flickerbridge* is merely a miscue: we know that James intends it to be taken seriously. How is *The Sacred Fount* to be taken? This short novel, surely one of the curiosities of literature, which inspired the earliest parody I ever remember to have seen of James (Owen Seaman's in *Borrowed Plumes*) and which apparently marked his passing over some borderline into a region where he became for the public exasperating and ridiculous, was written not long after *The Turn of the Screw* and is a sort of companion-piece to it. There is the same setting of an English country house, the same passages of a sad and strange beauty, the same furtive and disturbing goings-on in an atmosphere of clarity and brightness, the same dubious central figure, the same almost inscrutable ambiguity. As in the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, the fundamental question presents itself and never seems to get definitely answered: What is the reader to think of the protagonist?—who is here a man instead of a woman.

It would he tedious to analyze *The Sacred Fount* as I have done with *The Turn of the Screw*—and it would be a somewhat more difficult undertaking. *The Sacred Fount* is mystifying, even maddening. But I believe that if anyone really got to the bottom of it, he would throw a good deal of light on James. Rebecca West has given a burlesque account of it as the story of how "a week-end visitor spends more intellectual force than Kant can have used on The Critique of Pure Reason in an unsuccessful attempt to discover whether there exists between certain of his fellow-guests a relationship not more interesting among these vacuous people than it is among sparrows." A gentleman, who tells the story, goes to a week-end party in the country; there he observes that certain of his friends appear to have taken a new lease on life whereas others seem to have been depleted. He evolves a theory about them: the theory is that the married couples have been forming new combinations and that the younger individuals have been feeding the older individuals from the sacred fount of their youth at the price of getting used up themselves. This theory seems obviously academic: older people feed younger people with their vitality as often as younger people feed older ones—and evidently James does not mean us to accept it. The speculations of the narrator are supposed to characterize the narrator as the apparitions characterize the governess. As this rather eerie individual proceeds to cross-examine and spy on his friends in order to find out whether the facts fit his theory, we decide as we do in *The Turn of the Screw* that there are two separate things to be kept straight: a false hypothesis which the narrator is putting forward and a reality which we are supposed to divine from what he tells us about what actually happens. We remember the narrator of *The Aspern Papers*, another inquisitive and annoying fellow who is finally foiled and put to rout by the old lady whose papers he is trying to get hold of. In the case of *The Aspern Papers*, there is no uncertainty about James's attitude toward the narrator: James lets us know that the papers were none of the journalist's business and that the rebuff served him right. And the amateur detective of *The Sacred Fount* is foiled and rebuffed in precisely the same way by one of his recalcitrant victims. "My poor dear, you *are* crazy, and I bid you good-night!"—she says to him at the end of the story—"Such a last word," the narrator remarks, "the word that put me altogether nowhere—was too inacceptable not to prescribe afresh that prompt test of escape to other air for

which I had earlier in the evening seen so much reason. I *should* certainly never again, on the spot, quite hang together, even though it wasn't really that I hadn't three times her method. What I too fatally lacked was her tone." But why *did* he lack her tone?—why would he never again hang together? What are we supposed to conclude about his whole exploit? Why, no doubt that the sacred fount from which his friends had been drawing their new vitality was love rather than youth. He himself has no access to it and consequently does not understand it. But they have the forces of life on their side and when they find that he is becoming a nuisance, they are able to frighten him away even when they are lying to him. What has been kept out of sight all along, as it is in *The Turn of the Screw* and in so much of James's other late work, and what becomes more sinister and obscene the more exquisitely it is suppressed, is the simple existence of sex, which hardly enters into the observer's theory.

Yet *The Sacred Fount* remains somehow puzzling even after we have explained it in this way. If this really was James's purpose, why did he not make it clearer? And so even after we have made out the case for the hallucinated governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, the ambiguity still remains. Did James really ever intend us to find the clue? See his curious replies in his letters to people who write him about *The Turn of the Screw*: to what seem to have been leading questions, he seems to have given evasive answers, dismissing the story as a mere "pot-boiler", a mere "jeu d'esprit". Is the governess nice or is she horrid? Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians*, though tragic perhaps, is horrid, and she is vanquished by Basil Ransom. There is, however, always the possibility in the case of *The Turn of the Screw* that James may be deliberately amusing himself at the expense of the mystification of his readers. But in the case of *The Sacred Fount*, this alibi can hardly be offered.

Is the obnoxious week-end guest one of what used to be called the élite, a fastidious highly civilized sensibility, or is he merely morbid and a bore? The man who wanted to get the Aspern papers was fanatically inquisitive and a nuisance; but many of James's inquisitive observers who never take part in the action are presented as highly superior people. James confessed to being this sort of person himself. The truth is, I believe, that in both these works there is an ambiguity in James's own mind.

Ambiguity was certainly to grow on James. It passes all bounds in those scenes in his later novels (of which the talks in *The Turn of the Screw* between the housekeeper and the governess are only comparatively mild examples) in which the characters are able to carry on long conversations with each consistently mistaking the other's meaning and neither ever yielding to the impulse to say any of the obvious things which would clear the situation up. His long sentences with their circumlocutions—which became so much longer and vaguer when he began to dictate instead of writing—made possible an even more pervasive ambiguity, so that when he came to do the prefaces for his collected edition he was actually able to raise a vapor of uncertainty about stories which had formerly seemed simple. The public, who had once understood him, now complained that when they had finished one of his stories they did not know what was supposed to have happened. What had happened to Henry James to make his stories become so confusing?

The novels that had preceded *The Turn of the Screw* (the period of writing plays had intervened) had not been ambiguous at all. The figures in them had been perhaps more definite, the action more spontaneous and more positive, than in James's fiction of any other period. In *The Bostonians*, the Southern hero had succeeded in snatching away the heroine from the clammy Olive Chancellor. In *The Princess Casamassima*, the conflict inside Hyacinth Robinson had

been violently brought to an end by his suicide (a suicide which did perhaps represent the victory in him of the on-looking week-end guest). How then did James's ambiguity come to blur the whole effect of his work? To what sources in James himself is it traceable?

He was squeamish about matters of sex, it is true—and the people he wrote about were squeamish. And it is true that much of his contact with life was effected, not at close quarters, but through long infinitely sensitive antennae. Yet why, in a given story, should he leave us in doubt as to the facts, as to what kind of people we should think the actors?

III

Let us ask first, who are these characters of James's about whom we do not know quite what he means us to think?

The type is the cultivated American bourgeois, like Henry James himself, who lives on an income derived from some form (usually left extremely vague) of American business activity but who has never taken part in the achievements which made the income possible. These men turn their backs on business; they attempt to enrich their experience through the society and art of Europe. But they bring to it the bourgeois qualities of timidity, prudence, primness, the habits of mind of a narrow morality which, even when they wish to be open-minded, cause them to be easily shocked. They wince alike at the brutalities of the aristocracy and at the vulgarities of the working-class; they shrink most of all from the "commonness" of the less cultivated bourgeoisie, who, having acquired their incomes more recently, are not so far advanced in self-improvement. The women have the corresponding qualities: they are innocent, conventional and rather cold—sometimes they suffer from immaturity or Freudian complexes, sometimes they are neglected or cruelly

cheated by the men to whom they have given their hearts. (Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* ends the series begun by Catherine Sloper, the Eugénie Grandet of *Washington Square.*) And even when James's heroes and heroines are English, they assimilate themselves to these types.

It is illuminating in this connection to compare James's attitude to Flaubert's. The hero of *L'Education Sentimentale* is a perfect Henry James character: he is sensitive, cautious, afraid of life, he lives on a little income and considers himself superior to the common run, he carries on with a virtuous married woman as petty bourgeois as himself a flirtation which trickles on for years and never comes to anything serious. But Flaubert's attitude toward Frédéric Moreau is devastatingly ironic. Frédéric has his aspects of pathos, his occasional flashes of spirit; but Flaubert is quite emphatic in his final judgment of Frédéric. He considers Frédéric a worm.

Now James, though he admired Flaubert and though he was to some degree influenced by him, always felt toward him a special resentment. Flaubert had snubbed him once, to be sure; but James's feeling against him seems to have been particularly inspired by *L'Education Sentimentale.* He returned to the subject again, writing three separate essays at different periods. He could not forgive Flaubert Frédéric: he kept insisting that Frédéric was ignoble, unworthy of the attention of a great artist—and he made similar complaints, only a little less strong, about Emma Bovary.

Yet Frédéric is, as I have said, a perfect young man out of Henry James. He turns up unmistakably, it seems to me, as Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima.* James gives Hyacinth a tragic end and he accounts for his conflict of impulses by making him the illegitimate son of a French working-girl and an English nobleman; but Hyacinth resembles Frédéric precisely in that, among the varying social groups and currents, which often, due to his own sim-

plicity, seem to be acting over his head or behind his back, he sympathizes first with one, then with another, without ever being able effectively to participate, or even to play a definite role, in any. But where Flaubert differs from James is in that, whereas with James the main concern is to distill from his sensitive non-participant all the pathetic self-effacing nobility, all the thin and fine beauty he can get out of him, Flaubert suppressed his first version of *L'Education Sentimentale*, in which he had taken Frédéric's emotions seriously, and published a second and quite different one in which, scaling down Frédéric and his emotions to their stature in the perspective of history, he put them in their place once for all.

Yet James himself, as I have pointed out, had had his fun at the expense of his own Frédérics. Why, then, should he have found it so impossible to swallow Flaubert's Frédéric? It seems to me clear that James, because his own attitude toward this type was ambiguous, could not stand Flaubert's having settled Frédéric's hash by setting him down to the debit side of civilization. But what is at the bottom of this difference of attitude between Flaubert and James? The point is that Flaubert is a European in the great European classic tradition treating the petty bourgeois of his time. The past of Europe is present to him; he recreates it in other books; it seems to him bolder, nobler, more colorful, in a grander style, than the France of Louis-Philippe. But James is that anomalous thing, an American. He is an American who has spent much of his childhood and youth in Europe and who finally chooses to live in England; and he is imbued to a considerable extent with the European point of view. The monuments of feudal and ancient Europe, the duchesses and princes and princesses who seem to carry on the feudal tradition, are still capable of making modern life look to him dull, undistinguished and tame. But the American in the long run always insistently asserts himself.

After all, Frédéric and Madame Arnoux are the best people of Albany and Boston! He told a friend once of his indignation at an Englishwoman's saying to him in connection with something: "That is true of the aristocracy, but in one's own class it is quite different". As an American, it had never occurred to him that he could be described as a middle-class person. When Edith Wharton accused him in his later years of no longer appreciating Flaubert and demanded of him why Emma Bovary was not so good a subject for a novel as Anna Karenina, he said: "Ah, but one paints the fierce passions of a luxurious aristocracy, the other deals with the petty miseries of a little bourgeoise in a provincial town!" But if Emma Bovary is small potatoes, what about Daisy Miller? Why, Daisy Miller is an American girl! Emma Bovary has her debts and adulteries, but she is otherwise a conventional person, she remains in her place in the social scheme, even when she dreams of rising out of it: when she goes to visit the chateau, the sugar seems to her whiter and finer than elsewhere. Whereas Daisy Miller represents something which has walked quite out of the frame of Europe. When it comes back to Europe again, it disregards the social scheme. Europe is too much for Daisy Miller: she catches cold in the Coliseum, where according to European conventions she oughtn't to have been at that hour. But the great popularity of her story was certainly due to her creator's having somehow conveyed the impression that her spirit went marching on.

In Henry James's mind, there disputed all his life the European and the American points of view; and their debate, I believe, is closely connected with his inability sometimes to be clear as to what he thinks of a certain sort of person. It is quite mistaken to talk as if James had uprooted himself from America in order to live in England. He had travelled so much from his earliest years that he had never had any real roots anywhere. His father had himself been a

wandering intellectual, oscillating back and forth between the United States and Europe. And even in America, the Jameses oscillated back and forth between Boston and New York. They were not New Englanders but New Yorkers, and they had none of the tight local ties of New Englanders—they always came to Boston from a larger outside world and their attitude toward it was critical and objective. It was apparently partly the failure of *The Bostonians* which definitely discouraged Henry James in his ambition of becoming the American Balzac. He was in London, and he found he liked living in London better than living in Boston or New York. His parents in the States had just died and his sister came over to join him. He made his headquarters in London and presently began writing about the English.

In the novels of this period, *The Bostonians, The Princess Casamassima, The Tragic Muse*, he gives his clearest and most elaborate criticism of life. It is the only period in which his heroes and heroines are really up to anything in particular, have professions, missions, practical aims. Politics figure more or less prominently in all of them. And these long novels are succeeded by a period of playwriting, which put James under a considerable strain. During these years, he seems to have been taxing his energies to their extreme creative limit.

But his plays were not a success; and when he has recovered from the disappointment of his failure, he is seen to have passed a kind of crisis. He has definitely entered a new phase of which the most obvious feature is a subsidence back into himself. His productions of this period—*The Turn of the Screw, The Sacred Fount, What Maisie Knew, In the Cage*—though originally undertaken as short stories, would almost invariably, through a sort of expansion of the gas of the psychological atmosphere, turn out to swell into small novels. The peculiar odor of this atmosphere becomes for the first time noticeable; the style, as F. M. Ford

says, is for the first time distinctly gamey. And, what is most significant of all, the Jamesian central observer through whose intelligence the story is usually relayed to us, has undergone a strange diminution. This observer is no longer a complete and interesting person more or less actively involved in the events, but a small child, a telegraph operator who lives vicariously through the senders of telegrams, a week-end guest who seems not to exist in any other capacity except that of a week-end guest and who lives vicariously through his fellow visitors. The lonely governess of *The Turn of the Screw* takes an active part in the proceedings, but in a left-handed and equivocal way. In general, the events and the other characters are more remote from the central observer and the observer has become simplified, even infantile. The people who surround him or her tend to take on the diabolic value of the specters of *The Turn of the Screw*, and this diabolic value is almost invariably connected with their concealed and only guessed-at sexual relations. The innocent Nanda Brookenham of *The Awkward Age*, a work of the same period and group (it comes between *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Sacred Fount*), has a whole host of creepy creatures around her. James is ceasing to sustain the objectivity which has kept the outlines of his stories pretty definite up through his middle novels: he has relapsed into a dreamy inner world, where values are often uncertain and where it is not even possible for him any longer to judge the effect of his stories on the audience. One is dismayed in reading his comments on *The Awkward Age*, to find how well satisfied he is with it, to realize that he is unaware of the elements in the book which, in spite of the technical virtuosity displayed in it, make it unpleasant and irritating. The central figure of *The Sacred Fount* may perhaps have been presented ironically; but James could never have known how we should feel about the gibbering

disembowelled crew who hover around one another with sordid shadowy designs in *The Awkward Age.*

IV

What happens after this, however, is interesting. In *The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, the psychological atmosphere thickens, fills up the stories with the Jamesian gas instead of with detail and background. The characters (though often apprehended as convincing personal entities) are seen dimly through a phantasmagoria of dream-like metaphors and similes, which seem sometimes, as Rebecca West has remarked, more vivid and solid than the settings.

But a positive element reappears. For years, James has been writing about the English; but now the Americans come back into the picture. The typical conflict in James's fiction is between glamorous people who are also worldly and likely to be more or less wicked, and people of superior moral fastidiousness who are likely to be more or less homely and who in his early and latest periods are almost invariably Americans. In these three latest novels, the Americans score morally off an Italian prince, a charming French lady and a formidable group of middle-class English people. The English particularly, in *The Wings of the Dove*, are shown in a disagreeable light as greedy, unscrupulous and preoccupied mainly with keeping up dreary social positions. And at this time James revisits America, writes *The American Scene*, returns to it in a novel, *The Ivory Tower*, left unfinished at his death.

In his other unfinished novel, the fantasia called *The Sense of the Past*, he makes a young contemporary American go back into eighteenth century England. Here the Jamesian ambiguity serves an admirable artistic purpose. Is it the English of the past who are the ghosts or is it the

American himself who is a dream?—will the moment come when *they* will vanish or will he himself cease to exist? And as before there is a question of James's own asking at the bottom of the ambiguity: Which is real—America or Europe? It was, however, to be the American who was real.

Yes, in spite of the popular assumption founded on his expatriation, it is America which gets the better of it in Henry James. In his shy circumlocutory way, he was genuinely democratic. He could not escape from his feeling of solidarity with that crude and violent American world which he found himself so ill-fitted to cope with; and he was uncomfortable and unsatisfied all his life at his inability to get in closer touch with his fellow Americans. In a very curious late story called *Fordham Castle*, he tried to reach them at their ugliest and crudest—tried to establish some sort of relation with the America of Sinclair Lewis. He wanted, he said, to give some attention to the parents of the international Daisy Millers whose children had left them behind. And the terrible scene in the prison at the beginning of *The Princess Casamassima*, unique though it is in James, with its effect on the hero's career, shows that James could understand the tragic contradictions inherent in modern society. With James, except in his most morbid phases, the absurdities, the artificialities, the trivialities are all on the surface; beneath, the grasp on reality is firm, the intelligence profound. Others have done the American character with greater brilliance or dramatic vitality; none has shown it so successfully as James has done in relation to the rest of the world. Narrowly specialized in certain ways though his Americans may seem to be, they stand as a record of significant realities. All that was human, magnanimous, reviving in the new American spirit as it was still preserved in Henry James's time by the American leisure class is caught in the Milly Theales, the Lambert Strethers, the Adam Ververs of James's latest novels; and also all that was frus-

trated, sterile, excessively refined, depressing—all that they had in common with Frédéric Moreau and with the daughters of poor English parsons. There they are with their ideals and their blights. Milly Theale, for example, is one of the best pictures of a rich New Yorker in fiction: when we have forgotten the cloudy integument through which we have been obliged to divine her, we find that she remains in our mind as a personality independent of the novel, the kind of personality, deeply felt, invested with poetic beauty and unmistakably individualized, which only the creators of the first rank can give life to.

You may reproach Henry James, as it seems to me mistaken to do, with having neglected the industrial background behind them. You cannot say that he has not presented them at his best with the most precise and scrupulous truth. And the industrial background *is* there. Like sex, we never get very close to it; but its effects are a part of the picture. It is for those things of which that background has starved them that James's Americans come to Europe and it is their inability to find in other societies something with which their own society has never supplied them that is at the bottom of their most poignant disappointments. James's tone is more often old-maidish than his sense of reality is feeble. He was one of the coolest-headed of novelists, one of the least capable of faking. And the very phases of ambiguity I have noted, blurring the focus of a mind of the first order, avow the dilemmas by which it is taxed, the maladies of which they are symptoms.