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Critical Essays on Henry James

Critical Thought Series: 5

Edited by
Peter Rawlings

CRITICAL THOUGHT SERIES: 5

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON HENRY JAMES

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Critical Thought Series

Preface by the General Editor

Periodical literature is among the liveliest and most neglected of arts in the English language. Its historic landmarks are 1802, when the *Edinburgh Review* began, and 1902, which first saw the *Times Literary Supplement*. For nearly two centuries journalists and academics have met on equal terms, both in national journals and in little reviews.

The liveliness of these debates is easily lost, however, through being scattered wide and far, and this series, which is devoted to critical thought in the twentieth and the last years of the nineteenth centuries, is an attempt to recover the controversies that have surrounded the great critics of the modern age. Each volume is devoted to a school of criticism or to a single figure. Introduced by a volume editor, it reproduces reviews, articles and excerpts, largely in facsimile, and a detailed table of contents lists the original source of each item. It is hoped that the series will prove of value to the student and the general reader, and reflect the controversy that the great critics continue to inspire.

George Watson
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Introduction

Henry James began his professional life mutilating literary trifles; he ended it as the founder of a critical discourse whose subsequent reach has been immense.

His literary apprenticeship was long: *Watch and Ward* was serialized in 1871, when he was approaching his thirties, and appeared in book form, with copious revisions, in 1878; but *Roderick Hudson* (1875) was the first novel for which he gladly admitted paternity. James confined himself during this period to the production of short stories and to extensive reviewing, mostly for the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Nation*, and *North American Review*. The net was cast widely, even indiscriminately: legions of now long-forgotten novels were his staple, but tasty morsels such as *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century*, and *Ezra Stiles Gannett, Unitarian Minister in Boston, 1824–1871* did not go unnoticed. This was a period when James was developing literary allegiances, canons of taste, and embryonic ideas about theory and practice which were to inform, and sometimes coerce, his own writing for the remaining five decades of his life.

Fame of a kind was achieved – notoriety in some American quarters – with *Daisy Miller*; it was published in 1878, the year of James's initial volume of critical essays, *French Poets and Novelists*. This finding of his fictional direction did not mean the abandoning of critical writing. On the contrary, it now became the principal means by which he could articulate his theoretical awareness and distinguish himself from the multitudes of hack writers. 'The successful application of any art is a delightful spectacle,' wrote James in *The Art of Fiction*, 'but the theory too is interesting'.

A good many of James's essays have been excavated posthumously; but those he regarded as especially interesting were reprinted in his own lifetime. Hawthorne is the only writer to whom (in 1879) a whole book was devoted. *Partial Portraits* (1888), *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (1893), *Views and Reviews*, edited by Le Roy Phillips (1908), and *Notes on Novelists* (1914) appeared after 1878. The Prefaces to the 'New York Edition of the Novels and Tales of Henry James' (1907–1909) were collected by R.P. Blackmur in one volume, *The Art of the Novel* (1934). *Partial Portraits* contains 'The Art of Fiction', an essay much discussed at the time and subsequently regarded as a highly significant pronouncement on the craft of fiction; among others, a fine essay on Flaubert and two nervous encounters with Ibsen comprise *Essays in London and Elsewhere*; a major essay in *Notes on Novelists* is 'The New Novel'.

James was mainly regarded as a novelist; and despite his 112 tales, enormous range of critical writing, and twelve execrable plays, the novel was undoubtedly the focus of his energy. Given the professionalization, even industrialization, of criticism towards the end of the nineteenth century, such activity was often viewed by James as parasitic and contemptible. In 1891, he suggested that

> if literary criticism may be said to flourish among us at all, it certainly flourishes immensely, for it flows through the periodical press like a river that has burst its dykes ('The Science of Criticism').

What James objected to was the deluge of reviews which amounted to no more than 'Philistine twaddle' ('The Art of Fiction'). But he remained convinced that intelligent criticism had the 'prime' function of making

> our absorption and our enjoyment of the things that feed the mind as aware of itself as possible, since that awareness quickens the mental demand, which thus in turn wanders further and further for pasture ('The New Novel').

Criticism about criticism is a relatively recent phenomenon; and none of James's work of this kind was considered to any extent until *French Poets and Novelists*. By the time of the Prefaces, and their one-volume incarnation, James's criticism was taken much more seriously; it was no longer perceived as being ancillary to his fiction. A good many commentators now felt that not only was it an indispensable gloss on his imaginative output, but that his critical sensibility dominated even his fiction.

An outline of James's critical tenets, however reductive, is a necessary preliminary to any discussion of the issues generated by this collection of essays. From early reviews to the thickets of his New York Prefaces, James's critical preoccupations were consistent. Abstract rules, established in detachment from and prior to the work under construction or review, he abhorred. His commitment was to something like an organicist aesthetic and the freedom-within-limits it seemed to offer: the subject should determine the treatment. The method, that is, for assessing any work of art is one of examining whether or not the manner of its handling is appropriate to the subject. This is what James called, in 'The Art of Fiction', the 'test of execution'. Novels, like plants, should grow naturally, from within. The seed of a particular anecdote, incident, or character, has to be germinated and developed according to the laws implied by each case. The resulting work is the product of a subject encountered in experience and its interaction with the crucible of the writer's imagination; a faculty which allows sound, even creative and inspired, judgements about modes of treatment.

This aesthetic has two specific corollaries, a grasp of which is important when coming to terms with James's critical practice and the bases of any evaluations it involved. First of all, the closer the analogy between text and organism, conceived as a 'whole' greater than the sum of its interdependent parts, the more likely was it to receive an accolade. James preferred the taut writing of Merimée, for instance, to the 'loose, baggy monsters' of Tolstoy. Secondly, questions of morality were not regarded as part of the aesthetic domain. One might dislike, even strongly disapprove of, a subject; but what signified, ultimately, was the relation between that subject and the way in which it was developed. Such a position allowed James – partly with his American, especially Bostonian, audience in mind – to distance himself from a writer such as Zola and his sexual preoccupations, whilst simultaneously admiring his literary self-consciousness.

In a related way, James held that the most successful narrative was one where the 'point-of-view', the angle of vision and direct experience, was restricted to a central consciousness. He did not deny that with some subjects this was impossible; but the art to which they gave rise would be inferior. In America in the 1870s – not least under the influence of

Flaubert and Turgenev, both widely translated and read – 'dramatic' writing was the vogue. Typically, such novels moved to attenuate the narrative voice, leaving the characters – particularly the central, organizing consciousness – appearing to speak for themselves, more or less, in sequences of scenes developed on theatrical lines. James's concern, and hence the nature of his critical predilections, was less with action and the external, with what characters did, and more with reflections and the internal, the intersection and subtle interaction of complex consciousnesses. Henry James and William Dean Howells were regarded as the *enfants terribles* of realism, but a pyschological realism which in its apparent concern with complex interiors suggested, to conservative critics at least, unhealthy affinities with the French. This account draws on what is now an available *corpus* of James's critical and theoretical essays; and it implies a coherence which many early critics failed to find, on the evidence of the particular essay, or collection, before them.

One of the first reviews of *French Poets and Novelists*, and an early assessment of James as a critic, was penned by the writer who many saw as a fellow conspirator: W.D. Howells (1878). There was a feeling abroad that the two writers were conducting a campaign of mutual flattery and reciprocal promotion. Howells' most effusive essay on James appeared in 1882; there, James is viewed as 'shaping and directing American fiction'. He considered that any judgement of James which failed to take account of his criticism would be incomplete and that 'there are indeed those who insist that criticism is his true vocation'. In any event, in ways which anticipate T.S. Eliot's position, Howells argued that for modern novelists, critical concerns necessarily dominate, even in novels: it is 'what a writer has to say rather than what he has to tell that we care for nowadays'.

When dealing with some of the concrete criticism, however, Howells was less enthusiastic. Inconsistently, his 1878 review suggests that James was more of a novelist than a critic; and he is berated for not having the 'systematic sense' of Matthew Arnold. With the exception of the essay on Turgenev – 'a masterpiece of criticism' – Howells finds James 'exasperatingly inconclusive'. The critic Woodberry (1888), also lamented the lack of 'final criticism' in James. Similarly, an anonymous contributor to the *Nation* (1888) argued that the absence of judgements in *Partial Portraits*, its apparently indeterminate and pluralistic texture, 'would lead directly ... to moral indifferentiation in literature'. Howells believed that in *French Poets and Novelists*, the displacement of positive evaluations in favour of 'contradictory impressions' was part of the cultivation of an air of liberalism. He extended approval to the essay on Balzac but, in what is seen as a characteristic of the entire collection, for its 'many vivid statements' and 'impressions' rather than for any critical rigour. The very word 'French', to the American audience for which this collection was largely intended, would have connoted immorality and conjured up images of godless naturalists. There can be little doubt, therefore, that James's apparent inconclusiveness, as part of that general strategy of detaching himself from most of the writers under consideration, was of a self-censoring, palliatory kind. An anonymous reviewer, in the same year, struck the right kind of note when he drew attention to the 'anxiously impartial' and 'perversely uncertain' nature of James's writing.

George Saintsbury's essay on *French Poets and Novelists* is interesting not least because

he was, in many ways, a prototype of the modern academic-critic. Between 1895 and 1915 a Professor of English Literature at Edinburgh, he produced literary histories as well as major books on Dryden, Scott, Matthew Arnold, and Thackeray. Saintsbury credited James with the 'authority of actual experience' except in poetry, where his criticism was summarily dismissed. There are 'admirable' essays on Sand and Balzac; and 'it would be difficult to find a better piece of mere book criticism ... than the notice of *Madame Bovary*'. A reservation about James's 'disproportionate' preoccupation with the 'life and personality' of the writers, however, leads to the conclusion that 'as a critic of pure literature he is somewhat defective'.

Included in this collection are two American reviews of *Hawthorne*: one by Howells and the other anonymously contributed to the *Nation* (both 1880). James's predicament as an American writer partly writing within a European cultural framework, however critically, and offering observations from afar on the provinciality of American letters provoked and enraged a number of American writers. James had argued that 'it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature' and that 'it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion'. Howells retorted by writing that 'no man would have known less well what to do with that dreary worn-out paraphernalia than Hawthorne'. In an intelligent, illuminating, essay, the anonymous critic asserted that 'provinciality' was more of a problem for James than for a Hawthorne who had been mainly attacked for not being a realist in the James mould. The implication is that James is out of sympathy with the poetic, subjective, and fanciful, these qualities having been traded for extensive analysis and the struggle for objectivity. Nevertheless, for Howells, the strength of *Hawthorne* is in its movement away from biography and towards criticism.

For James, writing reviews initially had less to do with defining an aesthetic position, much more with subsidizing the production of relatively unsuccessful novels and short stories. But 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) is a measured and serious discussion of contemporary issues; and it can be seen as marking the beginning of his movement away from the scribbling of hasty critical assessments and towards the formulating of a theory of fiction.

The context of 'The Art of Fiction' (1884; reprinted in *Partial Portraits* in 1888) is particularly important to an understanding of its stance, and to any consideration of Robert Louis Stevenson's riposte, 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884). For this reason, Mark Spilka's informative essay (1977) is reprinted in this collection. Walter Besant's Royal Institution lecture on 'The Art of Fiction' (25 April 1884) initiated an intense debate, not least on his notion that writing is a craft for which rules can be established in advance. In challenging this, together with Besant's naîve ideas on morality and the novel, James appealed to life on behalf of art: realism, in complex ways, he argued, is art's imperative, to the extent that art can be seen as competing with life. What characterized life, for James, was freedom, spontaneity, and a defiance of *a priori* laws. Realism, however, was not photography: selection, arrangement, and the imagination were vital factors in the construction of an 'air of reality', an 'illusion' of life. Such realism is conspicuously interpretative rather than representational in some facile kind of way. Stevenson took issue with the very idea that art should, or can, 'compete with life'. Reality is all 'dazzle and

confusion'; art, a monastic retreat where 'figmentary abstraction' could be contemplated. Art substitutes 'a certain artificial series of impressions' for life's 'welter of impressions' and is contingent on a sustaining of an 'immeasurable difference from life'.

What matters is less the extent to which Stevenson misunderstood 'The Art of Fiction' (throughout his Prefaces, and in his later debate with H.G. Wells, there was an insistence on a boundary between art and life), more the evidence here for seeing James as an active participant in the literary controversies of the 1880s and 1890s. Curiously, James's stock as a critic, and his reputation as a man of letters, were rising in inverse proportion to the degree to which his fiction was being read. His novel *The Tragic Muse* (1890), for instance, was a dismal failure; yet his work was much discussed, and his reviews and critical articles easily placed. *Partial Portraits* was reviewed much more extensively than *French Poets and Novelists*. James Ashcroft Noble went as far as to suggest that the novel, by contrast with the critical essay, was an uncomfortable medium for a James whose essays would 'provide material for controversy' for 'some time to come'.

By 1889, James was involved in a controversy over the morality of his theory and practice which his writing either eluded or treated with acrobatic casuistry. Robert Buchanan's essay, 'The Young Man as Critic' (1889), firmly located him in France: his criticism preached what the fiction realized in practice: realism, immorality, and irreligion. Improbably, for Buchanan, it was impossible to subscribe to any of these in isolation. Analysis of any kind, especially critical analysis, was seen in terms of transgressive penetration, exhibitionism, and immodesty: James, and his fellow critics, formulated 'criticisms which are laborious self-dissections, indecent exposures of the infinitely trivial'. Above all, Buchanan attacked James for what he perceived as being the *salon* texture of his writing (revealing, in the process, his inability to negotiate the dense terrain of 'The Art of Fiction'): *Partial Portraits* is a 'book full of the agreeable art of conversation, such as we listen to in a hundred drawing-rooms'.

During the early 1890s, James was obsessively preoccupied with the theatre, the culminating moment being the disastrous failure of *Guy Domville* in January, 1895. The critical work, however, continued unabated. *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (1893) was better received than either *French Poets and Novelists* or *Partial Portraits*. Three fairly representative reviews are included here; and two of them (in the *Nation* and *Atlantic Monthly*) draw specific attention to the incisive writing on Ibsen.

Ibsen was the *bête noire* of the critical establishment. For Clement Scott, of the *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, his work was the apotheosis of all the immoral tendencies of the age. Ibsen's work was championed by critics such as George Bernard Shaw and seized upon by those actors more and more concerned with professionalizing their craft. Nevertheless, even amongst sympathetic critics, Ibsen's plays generated interpretative confusion and ambivalent judgements. James was no exception: the dominant tenor of his essays is one of cautious approval and tentative appropriation. For once, there is a sense less of an apparent inconclusiveness, more of a genuine uncertainty in the face of real exploration. The *Nation* reviewer thought the 'fine pages devoted to Ibsen' were 'more acute and comprehensive than all the screeds of his English admirers and protagonists put together'. Similarly, the *Atlantic Monthly* refers to James's essays on this 'much discussed and not easily understood dramatist' as 'complete and illuminating'. Despite

a *Dial* critic's belief that James, in *Essays in London and Elsewhere*, was a 'better essayist than novelist', the *Nation* took him to task for a formal emphasis whose consequence might well be a concentration on technicalities to the exclusion of any consideration of 'value in literature'. In a conclusion which betrays its anxieties about decadent tendencies, the reader is reminded that 'the word cannot kill, but, enshrining no perceptible idea, it is an empty and vain thing'.

By the mid-1890s and early 1900s, James's position as a critic was established if contended. Subsequently, he was often regarded as a literary theorist (a supreme accolade for some, for others a term of abuse) rather than a mere critic. Three important essays, and the first book-length study of his work (by Elizabeth Luther Cary) appeared during this period.

The first essay, Annie Macdonnell's, was published in the *Bookman* in 1896. In a familiar line about which there was a developing consensus, her opinion was that 'when Mr. James writes fiction you scent the critic, and when he writes criticism you feel the novelist underneath'. James's critical project is identified as one of making French writing familiar. But when it comes to evaluation, 'argumentative disapproval' is 'about as far as he ever reaches in security'. Impressionistic writing is his strength, together with a feel for memorable distillation: 'over and over again a phrase of his will recur to us, and sum up all the expressible truth on a subject, or lead inevitably to it'.

James's Introduction to Balzac's *The Two Young Brides* (1902) was destructively engaged in the *Living Age* in 1903. Fundamentally, the critic is out of sympathy with an approach which he sees as preserving 'whispered sweet nothings' at the expense of a Saintsbury-like scientific, academic criticism which should, by now, have displaced it. James, who had no interest in supplying some kind of 'explanation' of the novel (which is what the critic requires), is harangued for producing 'forty-three pages' which 'are about as practically useful as Johnson's definition of a net'. The terms deployed constantly imply an effete James whose way of relating to Balzac is unmanly: he is regarded as 'pirouetting across the huge reputation of Balzac'; and instead of being handled with 'respectful fearlessness', Balzac is 'dandled, cosseted, pinched, and called a dear'.

Elizabeth Luther Cary, on the other hand, makes a range of incisive comments on James's critical work. In addition to 'The Art of Fiction', the essays on George Eliot are where the centres of gravity are to be found. These are interesting not so much in themselves but for what they reveal about James's 'plan of development' as a novelist. She saw him as attempting to achieve a balance between an 'air of reality' and its refraction through 'the quality of the mind of the producer'.

W.C. Brownell, a leading American critic and literary editor for the publishers Charles Scribner's Sons, produced an essay (1909) which remains one of the most deeply considered and consistently interesting accounts of James. Brownell begins by acknowledging – regretfully, to a degree – that 'the present time may fairly be called the reign of theory in fiction'; and he suggests that 'James's art is nothing more modern than in being theoretic'. In the face of the 'development of the philosophic and critical spirit', the 'creative imagination' is in decline. Although James's criticism is regarded as 'incidental and secondary' to his work as a novelist, the argument is that the two are importantly related: the art 'explicitly, with conviction, illustrates his theory'. The critical essays have been

a 'little agglutinate rather than synthetic'; and they are not 'very attentively distributed or organized'. Nonetheless, each has consisted of 'a series of penetrating remarks, an agglomeration of light but telling touches'. Encountered again is the James of Macdonnell's essay: a producer of memorable, illuminating, observations, here seen as being free from 'traditional or temperamental deflection', not the author of essays 'rounded, complete' and with a 'final characterization of the subject from a central point of view'. Brownell identifies two critical positions as characteristic: the stress on restricting the point of view in narrative and, related to this, a commitment to sustaining a 'disinterested', objective, rather than subjective, authorial stance. Everywhere, there is evidence of James having 'read widely', especially in 'latter-day fiction', and of his having assimilated such reading thoroughly. Brownell's final assessment implies a challenge which legions of critics were soon to accept with vigour: 'his art is as theoretic as his philosophy of life obscure'.

The divergence, in terms of style, between the early and later work was one of James's main concerns in the early 1900s. He was also keen to preside over a standard edition of his novels and tales. Both projects converged, given that he subjected much of his work to careful revision, in what was to become the *New York Edition of the Novels and Tales of Henry James* (1907–1909). Most critics disapproved of what they saw as amounting to the involution, in the later mode, of earlier texts. There was a widespread feeling that clarity had given way to the dense and opaque, and diversity to the uniform and static. The observations made by Montgomery Schuyler, writing under the characteristically American headline 'Henry James Done Over' (1908), are representative.

For each volume of the New York Edition, James supplied a Preface; and there was general agreement, if for different reasons, that this was criticism of the highest order. None of James's critical work has attracted more attention; and these Prefaces have become the corner-stone of his critical and theoretical reputation. They have been subjected, in the process, to a range of variably unsatisfactory systematizations. R.P. Blackmur's 'Introduction' to *The Art of the Novel*, the one-volume collection of the Prefaces, is included here because it represents perhaps the most plausible attempt to identify critical figures in the Jamesian carpet.

Early reviewers were not necessarily convinced that the importance of the Prefaces was in their articulation of any general principles: frequently, their value was located in the commentary offered on the processes of composition, particularly at the stage of conception, of James's texts. Edward Hale (1908) did not neglect their contribution to 'one's conception of the novel as a literary form', but his emphasis was on the evidence made available by the Prefaces of how James 'conceives his work'. This is also the line taken by Sturge-Gretton (1908). Whereas, for Schuyler, prefaces had hitherto been coyly restricted to 'information and reminiscence', these Prefaces were utilized as vehicles of 'auto-criticism', a term first used by Robert Louis Stevenson. In an essay entitled 'Henry James: Auto-Critic' (1909), Edward Marsh's analogy is with the 'literary confessional'. Marsh stresses the concerns of these Prefaces with 'origins'; and in the process, he set the agenda for countless critical essays to come:

> It would not be altogether easy to disengage these mere general observations and arrange them in an orderly sequence; could it be done, the result would be the most searching analysis of the novelist's art that has ever been put to paper. I do not know that he has a 'theory' of the novel,

> but he has an abundance of ideas that display the subtlest insight, backed by the most logical arguments.

Marsh himself attempted to draw out what he saw as some of the principles informing James's work: fiction should resist the sprawling and have an 'economy of interest'; at the level of composition, this entails the germination of seeds the properties of which govern their own development; 'realism' is a complex, rather than a simple, concept, a function of 'observations *plus* manipulations, the disposing of elements', and 'the creation of relations'.

Notes on Novelists (1914), the last of James's volumes of literary criticism, was reviewed fairly extensively. Since the success of 'Daisy Miller' over thirty years earlier, his readership had progressively diminished to a loyal coterie. The challenge, mostly regarded as the excesses, of his late style was not accepted by the reading public at large. James had been as interested in popularity as any other writer; and he wrote enviously of the huge sales of George Sand, Mrs. Humphry Ward, Ouida, and others. In his later life, however, he came to regard mass acclaim with suspicion as well as envy. James reached the conclusion, in an adroit logical manipulation, that low sales were a guarantee of quality. The most significant essay in this volume, 'The New Novel', has the air of a last testament. There, on the basis of his belief in economy and the need for an organic relation between a carefully conceived, and circumscribed, subject and its treatment, James disposed of such writers as Tolstoy, Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, and D.H. Lawrence. H.G. Wells, in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), identified the chasm between James and himself: 'He thought of' the novel 'as an Art Form... But I was disposed to regard a novel as about as much an art form as a market place or a boulevard'. Realism or naturalism, James argued, as a kind of uncritical representation of modern life, had displaced in writers such as Wells the artistic imperatives of the novel: selection, organization, formal control, and an emphasis on art rather than life. Consistent with his 'The Art of Fiction', James lamented that lack of technical self-consciousness without which the novel could hardly be regarded as an art form at all.

Louis Bredvold (1914), for one, felt that the problem with *Notes on Novelists* was that it 'came from the artist's studio, full of shop talk about methods and processes'. Philip Littell (1914) suggested, however, that the 'illumination' in this collection was of James, and his 'aesthetic doctrine', rather than of the various writers discussed. He praised it as a 'book of slow approaches, sensitive delineation and delayed ultimate insights'. In the process, he made a memorable description of James's fictional and critical method as it surfaced in sentences which

> hang back and retard, which almost persuade us that the interest blowing him toward the shore of his subject is really an adverse wind, which he must beat up against.

The 'involutions and qualifications' of these essays, insisted Henry Sydnor Harrison, are not there 'for mere devilry; rather are they the essential manifestations of a highly complicated' critical '"possession"'. Altogether, this was a 'brilliant dissertation on the theory and practice of the novel'. Rebecca West, however, clearly aligned herself with those critics who regretted what they saw as James's detached, elitist, and calcified formalism:

> he splits hairs till there are no longer any hairs to be split, and the mental gesture becomes merely the making of agitated passes over a complete and disconcerting baldness.

Appropriately enough, given the tenor of the essay, the purported circumstance of her reflections is a First World War air raid and the necessary interlude it provided for speculations about what she saw as refined trivialities. Nonetheless, it is apparent from the reception of *Notes and Novelists* that by the end of his critical career, James was regarded as a theoretical force to be reckoned with, rather than as a mere purveyor of fashionable literary conversation.

Henry James's death in 1916 prompted a number of reassessments of his work. Ezra Pound's essay (1920) employs a good deal of colloquial energy, and some facetiousness, in attempting its problematic illuminations. Pound is much preoccupied with what he saw as James's 'desire to square all things to the ethical standards of a Salem mid-week Unitarian prayer meeting'. The overwhelming question, for such a critic, was whether or not the writers under consideration were 'fit persons to be received in the James family back-parlor'. Clearly, Pound had failed to read the French criticism all that closely; specifically, comments recognizably appropriate to the early reviews cease to be interesting in the light of James's statement in 'The Art of Fiction' that 'questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair'.

T.S. Eliot's obituary (1916), with its contrived ambivalence and irony, can be taken as both a celebration of pure intelligence – 'he had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it' – and a denigration of a James bereft of ideas. Similarly, his evaluation of James as a 'negligible curiosity' is later clarified: 'to be understood by a few intelligent people is all the influence a man requires'. In any event, the reader is left balancing irrelevant intelligence against unviolated purity, and an almost total failure to have any impact at large against an exquisite power necessarily available only to the few. Eliot denied to James, 'emphatically', any status as a 'successful *literary* critic' in the conventional sense. But in the novels, he saw a critical sensibility at work: ideas are not the prey, but 'living people'. Much depends here, of course, on what is meant by 'ideas'. It is possible to argue that James's critical creed was well-developed and more or less consistently articulated and applied. Eliot's view, however, does allow a productive concentration on the extent to which James's ultimate concern was with the processes of art and life, in all their formal complexity, rather than with the local materials, or empirical manifestations, on and within which they operate.

From the outset, a decision was taken to concentrate, in this collection, on essays and reviews which appeared during James's own life. There were two particular reasons for this. First of all, a plethora of critical work produced since 1916 – much of it increasingly repetitive, arcane, and unnecessary – is widely available. Secondly, these essays (few of which have ever been reprinted) are interesting not only for what they have to say about James, but for what they reveal about developing critical methods and ideas in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to later essays to which allusions have already been made, some important items which appeared after James's death have been included. A.B. Walkley's essay (1928), which examines Percy Lubbock's edition of the letters, sends out an early signal about the significance of those letters for any analysis of James's criticism. There are extracts, too, from Morris Roberts' *Henry James's Criticism*

(1929). James's extensive writing on the theatre was hardly known until Allan Wade's edition of 1949. These essays attracted scant attention at the time of their first appearance; and for this reason, Wade's 'Introduction' has been reprinted here. Two relatively recent essays, by Matthew Little and Philip Horne, have been selected because they make a substantial contribution to the ceaselessly interesting debates about, respectively, 'The Art of Fiction' and biographical problems. Finally, René Wellek's 'Henry James's Literary Theory and Criticism' is here because it has few rivals as a relatively short and comprehensive treatment of James's critical work.

Peter Rawlings

RECENT LITERATURE.

If novelists and poets are not the best critics of their art, they are often the most suggestive commentators upon it; and when they have the skill to formulate and weave together their opinions they give us something rather better than mere criticism. Readers of Mr. Henry James, Jr., were for some time, and a few of them may still be, in doubt whether he is more a novelist than critic; but we think his recent volume of essays[1] may go a good way towards fixing the opinion that his peculiar attractiveness in this line of writing is due in great measure to the fact that he is himself a creative artist. His reviews of other writers are not precisely criticism, but they possess a pleasant flavor of criticism, agreeably diffused through a mass of sympathetic and often keenly analytical impressions. It is saying a great deal when we admit that he reminds us more of Sainte-Beuve than any other English writer; but he is more a *causeur* than the author of the famous Causeries, and less a critic in the systematic sense. We hardly know how we can fully illustrate our meaning except by more references and quotations than it is convenient to make here. But let the reader turn to the splendid chapter on Balzac, who has never before received so abundant and interesting a showing, within similar compass, as at Mr. James's hands. In this there are to be found most of the interesting facts of Balzac's life grouped with good judgment, a sketchy view of the character of his works, and a great many vivid statements of the impressions produced by them. But we can imagine that to a person who had read nothing of Balzac the article would have an exasperating inconclusiveness. It is a mixture of the frankest admiration and (to use Mr. James's own word) of brutal snubbing, which continues to the very last page. The one unqualified statement — and that, by the way, is a real gain to one's stock of well-defined perceptions — is that Balzac's great characteristic was his "sense of this present terrestrial life, which has never been surpassed, and in which his genius overshadowed everything else." For the rest, we are given to understand that his greatest merits were his greatest faults; that his novels are ponderous and shapeless, yet have more composition and more grasp on the reader's attention than any others, etc. "He believed that he was about as creative as the Deity, and that if mankind and human history were swept away the Comédie Humaine would be a perfectly adequate substitute for them," is the writer's witty statement of the degree of his conceit; and he quotes Taine, approvingly, as saying that after Shakespeare Balzac is our great magazine of documents on human nature; yet this he partially retracts, again, by saying that when Shakespeare is suggested we feel rather Balzac's differences from him. The French novelist's atmosphere, we are told, is musty, limited, artificial. In the next sentence, however, Mr. James assures us that, notwithstanding this "artificial" atmosphere, Balzac is to be taken, like Shakespeare, as a final authority on human nature. Then again he lowers him a peg by saying that he lacked "that slight but needful thing, — charm." "But our last word about him is that he had incomparable power." The writer himself seems to feel, in this closing sentence, that he has given a somewhat too paradoxical summary. The same difficulty could be raised with all the other essays in this collection, excepting the one on Tourguéneff, which comes near being a masterpiece of criticism, and perhaps ought to be decidedly rated as such. In general, there is a want of some positive or negative result clearly enunciated; and the presence of such results is what, to our mind, distinguishes the systematic critic like Sainte-Beuve or Matthew Arnold from the highly suggestive, charming talker like Mr. James.

If we are speaking of criticism, the question is whether we are to approach as nearly as possible to an equation of conflicting views, or whether we are to work out a problem to some conclusion on one side or the other. As a matter of definition we are inclined to say that pure criticism has for its aim the latter task. In the case of Balzac, for example, there is a wonderful stimulus and surprise in the obvious inadequacy and disrelish with which Sainte-Beuve treats him. The very narrowness of his judgment has a value. Mr. James may say that he does not write either for readers

[1] *French Poets and Novelists.* By Henry James, Jr. London: Macmillan & Co. 1878.

who simply want information about French authors, or for those who prefer opinions that cut only one way; and that he cultivates breadth, of set purpose. It is not necessary, however, to be narrow in taking a side: there are critics who show the finest comprehension of all the aspects of a genius, yet on the whole advocate a certain view with satisfactory unity and consecutiveness. We find fault with Mr. James's attitude, judged as a critic, because it implies a certain nervousness that if he curtails his contradictory impressions he may not appear liberal enough. With less extreme expression and more art, liberality need not fear to be overlooked. A fault connected with this is the tone of patronage which the writer is led to take towards the larger minds among those which he discusses; and possibly attributable to the same source is a not altogether pleasant jocularity in the treatment of those dubious relations between men and women which the themes selected naturally involve.

But we have said that a creative artist discoursing on the works of other creators can be more entertaining than the mere critic; and Mr. James is irresistible in the ease and brilliancy of his style, and the felicity with which he calls our attention to the qualities most to be admired in his subjects and traces some of the reasons why they are admirable. Next to the Tourguéneff we like best the paper on De Musset, which differs from all the others in having to some extent the tone of advocacy, and pushing its view of the poet with a thoroughly enjoyable ardor. That on Mérimée's Letters is almost too slight to keep company with the rest, and we do not know how to excuse, in the essay on the Théatre Français, the haste with which Mlle. Sarah Bernhard is passed by. Even with the style, too, one is occasionally dissatisfied, owing to some obscurity which seems to be due to a disinclination to correct. It is regrettable that we have not space to pay the homage of quotation to several of the searching, the humorous, the sympathetic things which Mr. James scatters copiously over his pages; and we cannot deny ourselves, in closing, the privilege of reproducing here, if only in tribute to our own appreciativeness, these fragments from the shrewd and trenchant essay on Baudelaire. "A good way to embrace Baudelaire at a glance is to say that he was in his treatment of evil exactly what Hawthorne was not, — Hawthorne, who felt the thing at its source, deep in the human consciousness. Baudelaire's infinitely slighter genius apart, he was a sort of Hawthorne reversed." "The crudity of sentiment of the advocates of 'art for art' is often a striking example of the fact that a great deal of what is called culture may fail to dissipate a well-seated provincialism of spirit. They talk of morality as Miss Edgeworth's infantine heroes and heroines talk of 'physic'. . . It is in reality simply a part of the essential richness of inspiration, — it has nothing to do with the artistic process, and it has everything to do with the artistic effect." That is almost the best thing in this superior book. The point has hardly been put with so much grasp and cleverness before.

William Dean Howells, 'Recent Literature', a Review of *French Poets and Novelists*, *Atlantic Monthly*, 42 (1878), pp. 118–119.

— Mr. Henry James's last volume, French Poets and Novelists, is the most perversely uncertain book of criticism I have ever read. No sooner have you pinned your faith upon some excellent sentences, breathing admiration for one of the French geniuses he discusses, than upon turning the leaf you discover another set of paragraphs concerning the same person, equally excellent, but bristling with censure. He never says one single admiring word without coming back, sooner or later, to take the life out of it with a thrust as keen as it is skillful. He is so anxiously impartial that, from beginning to end, we are never sure where he stands himself; like the countryman, who, upon hearing of a certain great fortune, fixed his eyes upon a fence and remarked thoughtfully, "Well, if *I* had that amount of money, I wouldn't live *here*. No, by George! — nor anywhere else!" so in this volume Mr. James certainly is n't here; no, nor anywhere else! In spite of his delightful style, therefore, I felt after reading these pages of his as if I would like to have a partisan admirer of each one of those French geniuses enter, take a chair, and talk to me for at least an hour, just to restore my balance.

Emerson defines a partisan as a narrow man who, because he does not see many things, sees some one intensely and becomes inspired by it. Now Mr. James sees so many things, sees so widely, that he loses, I think, the entirety, the plain effect of the whole. And, if we are not careful, he is such a wizard with his words that he will make us lose it too. He will describe to you so accurately and beautifully the ten thousand nerves and muscles, their hues and purposes, that you will forget that your interest should be in the whole, not parts, and that the most perfect colored map known of the nerves and muscles is not, after all, the man. His book therefore, as a whole, is unsatisfactory. Every one can see how slight, insufficient, and hurried are some of these papers; like the one on Mérimée. And as for the one on the Théâtre Français, — what shall we say of a man who, after proposing to bring before us, one by one, the principal members of that perfect company, rings down the curtain and goes home without calling forward the one who to ninety-nine out of a hundred of us is by far the most interesting, namely, Sara Bernhardt? Then he gives us ever so many charming microscopic pages about a departed French lady of whom we have never heard, and only a patched-up account of George Sand! And so on. Finally, he really uses that reporter's word "enjoyable." I am so pleased by this last that I voluntarily acknowledge the delightfulness of such phrases as "her serene volubility," "the earth-scented facts of life," "tragically uncomfortable," and others like them, with which the pages are gemmed; his style certainly is delicious. *Only*, one resents even deliciousness when it is continually presented at the point of the bayonet.

The paper on Tourguéneff is a strong contribution, alas! to the "Tourguéneff literature" of to-day. In it he says, alas! "Nothing in my opinion cultivates the taste more [alas!] than to read him." (The sighs are mine.) Mr. James has let himself out a breadth here. Whether he balances it with something terrible on the next page, as usual, I do not remember; but *I* will balance it with something which *I* consider terrible (although I presume he does not) from his own essay. It was so dreadful that I wrote it down. "He [Tourguéneff] is a story-teller who has taken notes. If we are not mistaken, he writes down an idiosyncrasy of character, a fragment of talk, an attitude, a feature [yes, especially noses], a gesture, and keeps it if need be for twenty years, till just the moment for using it comes, just the spot for placing it." Precisely. That is the way it reads, — a patchwork of facts, attitudes, and features. But where is the beauty? Where is the interest? Where is the passion? Where the continuity? And more than all, where is the happiness?

[Unsigned], A Review of *French Poets and Novelists*, *Atlantic Monthly*, 42 (1878), pp. 508–509.

French Poets and Novelists. By Henry James. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1878.)

Some people, we believe, are of opinion that there is too much criticism nowadays. It is hardly to be expected, however, that critics themselves should be thus minded; and for our own part we are very glad to welcome plenty more of it. It is extremely unlikely that any man of competent culture and intelligence can set himself seriously to work to tell us how the productions of other men affect him without teaching us something the learning of which is both interesting in itself and useful as a help to the study of his subjects. In great part of the book before us, moreover, Mr. James speaks with the authority of actual experience. He has himself applied his notions of what a novel should be to the task of actual novel-production, and that not without considerable success. The fact does not, perhaps, add to the authority of his criticism, but it certainly adds to its interest. The contents of the book are sufficiently miscellaneous. There are three essays on French poets, De Musset, Gautier, and Baudelaire; four on French novelists, George Sand, Balzac, De Bernard, and Flaubert; and some others on subjects which, though not exactly answering to the title, are not very far removed from it, such as the Russian novelist Turgénieff, Mérimée's *Lettres à une Inconnue*, and so forth, besides a paper, the most interesting of all, to our thinking, on Mr. James's own impressions of French actors.

We may say at once, and frankly, that Mr. James does not take high rank as a poetical critic. There is indeed one remark of his, which, unless we mistake him, settles his claims in this direction. He speaks of Poe's "very valueless verses." Now we are of course well enough aware of the incomprehensible fancy of American critics for depreciating Poe, and we are also well aware that all critics are entitled to differ as to his comparative merits according as they take for their criterion his best, average, or worst work. Perhaps Mr. James only means that some of the verses are very valueless. But if he means to apply that epithet to "Annabel Lee" and "The Haunted Palace," to mention no others, we must regretfully inform him that he is out of court. He thus confesses himself to possess no ear, and, without an ear, poetical criticism is impossible. It so happens, however, that no one of the three poets treated by Mr. James is a poet pure and simple, and hence there is still much that is interesting in his essays. That on Gautier abounds with ingenious epigram, and will be found very amusing reading. Mr. James's admiration for Alfred de Musset is satisfactory, after the rather hard measure which both in England and France has been of late years dealt to that poet, and the critic's appreciation of things dramatic makes his verdict a valuable one. As to Baudelaire Mr. James will hardly expect us to agree with him. His remarks are, however, decidedly interesting as presenting very well the merely common-sense view of the matter—a view which is indeed generally that which Mr. James prefers. The fault is that the writer has not taken in anything like the whole of his subject. Somebody has very happily observed that the decriers of Voltaire speak of him "as if he had never done anything but write the *Pucelle* and make jokes on Habakkuk." Mr. James and his like write of Baudelaire as if he had never done anything but write *La Charogne* and talk about baby's brains. It is rather amusing to find that Mr. James makes absolutely no mention of the *Petits Poëmes en Prose*. "Les Bienfaits de la Lune" and "La Belle Dorothée" would have squared but awkwardly with his theory of Baudelaire's exclusive devotion to "the nasty."

Very different is Mr. James's handling of the novelists. His essays on Sand and Balzac are really admirable. One feels not only that he is thoroughly acquainted with the whole range of subject in each case, but that his matter-of-fact, external way of looking at it has its advantage. As an instance of this we may mention that while his admiration for Balzac is unstinted—indeed those who know Mr. James's own novels can best judge of this—he fully admits the "lack of charm" which is the great fault of the *Comédie Humaine*, and which most of its admirers deny so lustily. Again, after speaking with the utmost relish of George Sand, he confesses that he cannot read her books twice, a difficulty we fancy more often felt than admitted. If we had to find fault with

this part of the book we should say that the life and personality of the writers seems to possess a rather disproportionate interest for Mr. James, but this is natural enough in one who is evidently a student of life and character rather than of books. On the other hand it would be difficult to find a better piece of mere book criticism —putting the opinions expressed aside— than the notice of *Madame Bovary*, not an easy book to criticise either. It is curious to contrast with this Mr. James's summary depreciation of the masterly *Tentation de Saint Antoine*. In dealing with Charles de Bernard the criticism is again one of the man almost as much as of his work, and a capital piece of criticism it is of its kind. The miscellaneous essays at the end of the book will not be of least interest to the reader. The first is on Turgénieff. We are not told whether Mr. James derives his knowledge of the Russian novelist from the originals or from translations, but whichever of the two be his source of information, he has evidently studied his subject very carefully. The paper might, perhaps, be better entitled "The Characteristics of a Novelist, as exhibited in Ivan Turgénieff," and it contains some interesting hints as to Mr. James's views of his own function. We are very glad to see that he fully recognises the necessity of basing novel-writing on the study of character. The two next papers are on the letters of the Ampères and of Madame de Sabran, and they are capital examples of the sort of narrative exposition which Sainte-Beuve put in vogue. In treating of Mérimée Mr. James is, perhaps, again a little inadequate, because the man in Mérimée is distinctly inferior to the *littérateur*. But the dramatic criticism which closes the volume is very pleasant and full of life. Mr. James is one of those good Americans who have gone to Paris before they die, and his enjoyment of the fine things Paris has to offer is quite exhilarating. Altogether the book is one to be recommended, though we should like exactly to reverse the order of its component parts, because, as it is, Mr. James has not put his best foot foremost. As a critic of pure literature he is somewhat defective; but as a critic of life as represented in literature he takes very high rank indeed, and gives promise of much success in his other and more peculiar vocation of novelist.

GEORGE SAINTSBURY.

George Saintsbury, A Review of *French Poets and Novelists*, *Academy*, 13 (20 April 1878), pp. 337–338.

JAMES'S HAWTHORNE.[1]

Mr. James's book on Hawthorne, in Morley's English Men of Letters series, merits far closer examination and carefuller notice than we can give it here, alike for the interest of its subject, the peculiarity of its point of view, and the charm and distinction of its literature. An American author writing of an American author for an English public incurs risks with his fellow-countrymen which Mr. James must have faced, and is much more likely to possess the foreigner whom he addresses with a clear idea of our conditions than to please the civilization whose portrait is taken. Forty-six, fifty, sixty-four, are not dates so remote, nor are Salem and Concord societies so extinct, that the people of those periods and places can be safely described as provincial, not once, but a dozen times; and we foresee, without any very powerful prophetic lens, that Mr. James will be in some quarters promptly attainted of high treason. For ourselves, we will be content with saying that the provinciality strikes us as somewhat over-insisted upon, and that, speaking from the point of not being at all provincial ourselves, we think the epithet is sometimes mistaken. If it is not provincial for an Englishman to be English, or a Frenchman French, then it is not so for an American to be American; and if Hawthorne was "exquisitely provincial," one had better take one's chance of universality with him than with almost any Londoner or Parisian of his time. Provinciality, we understand it, is a thing of the mind or the soul; but if it is a thing of the experiences, then that is another matter, and there is no quarrel. Hawthorne undoubtedly saw less of the world in New England than one sees in Europe, but he was no cockney, as Europeans are apt to be.

At the same time we must not be thought to deny the value and delightfulness of those chapters on Salem and Brook Farm and Concord. They are not very close in description, and the places seem deliciously divined rather than studied. But where they are used unjustly, there will doubtless be abundant defense; and if Salem or Brook Farm be mute, the welkin will probably respond to the cries of certain critics who lie in wait to make life sorrowful to any one dealing lightly with the memory of Thoreau or the presence of the poet Channing. What will happen to a writer who says of the former that he was "worse than provincial, he was parochial," and of the latter that he resembled the former in "having produced literary compositions more esteemed by the few than by the many," we wait with the patience and security of a spectator at an *auto da fé*, to see. But even an unimbattled outsider may suggest that the essential large-mindedness of Concord, as expressed in literature. is not sufficiently recognized, although it is thoroughly felt. The treatment of the culture foible and of the colorless æsthetic joys, the attribution of "a great deal of Concord five and thirty years ago" to the remark of a visitor of Hawthorne that Margaret Fuller "had risen perceptibly into a higher state of

[1] *Hawthorne.* [Morley's English Men of Letters.] By Henry James, Jr. London: Macmillan & Co. New York: Harper and Brothers. 1880.

being since their last meeting," are exquisite, — too exquisite, we fear, for the sense of most Englishmen, and not too fine only for the rarefied local consciousness which they may sting. Emerson is indeed devoutly and amply honored, and there is something particularly sweet and tender in the characterization of such surviving Brook Farmers as the author remembers to have met; but even in speaking of Emerson, Mr. James has the real misfortune to call his grand poem for the dedication of the monument to Concord Fight a "little hymn." It is little as Milton's sonnet on Shakespeare is little.

We think, too, that in his conscience against brag and *chauvinism* Mr. James puts too slight a value upon some of Hawthorne's work. It is not enough to say of a book so wholly unexampled and unrivaled as The Scarlet Letter that it was "the finest piece of imaginative writing put forth in" America; as if it had its parallel in any literature. When he comes to speak of the romances in detail, he repairs this defect of estimation in some degree; but here again his strictures seem somewhat mistaken. No one better than Mr. James knows the radical difference between a romance and a novel, but he speaks now of Hawthorne's novels, and now of his romances, throughout, as if the terms were convertible; whereas the romance and the novel are as distinct as the poem and the novel. Mr. James excepts to the people in The Scarlet Letter, because they are rather types than persons, rather conditions of the mind than characters; as if it were not almost precisely the business of the romance to deal with types and mental conditions. Hawthorne's fictions being always and essentially, in conception and performance, romances, and not novels, something of all Mr. James's special criticism is invalidated by the confusion which, for some reason not made clear, he permits himself. Nevertheless, his analysis of the several books and of the shorter tales is most interesting; and though we should ourselves place The Blithedale Romance before The House of the Seven Gables, and should rank it much higher than Mr. James seems to do, we find ourselves consenting oftener than dissenting as we read his judgments. An admirably clear and just piece of criticism, we think, is that in which he pronounces upon the slighter and cheaper *motif* of Septimius Felton. But here there are not grounds for final sentence; it is possible, if that book had received the author's last touches, it might have been, after all, a playful and gentle piece of irony rather than a tragedy.

What gives us entire satisfaction, however, is Mr. James's characterization, or illustration, of Hawthorne's own nature. He finds him an innocent, affectionate heart, extremely domestic, a life of definite, high purposes singularly unbaffled, and an "unperplexed intellect." The black problem of evil, with which his Puritan ancestors wrestled concretely, in groans and despair, and which darkens with its portentous shadow nearly everything that Hawthorne wrote, has become his literary material; or, in Mr. James's finer and more luminous phrase, he "transmutes this heavy moral burden into the very substance of the imagination." This strikes us as beautifully reasonable and true, and we will not cloud it with comment of ours. But satisfactorily as Mr. James declares Hawthorne's personality in large, we do not find him sufficient as to minor details and facts.

His defect, or his error, appears oftenest in his discussion of the note-books, where he makes plain to himself the simple, domestic, democratic qualities in Hawthorne, and yet maintains that he sets down slight and little aspects of nature because his world is small and vacant. Hawthorne noted these because he loved them, and as a great painter, however full and vast his world is, continues to jot down whatever strikes him as picturesque and characteristic. The disposition to allege this inadequate reason comes partly from that confusion of the novelist's and the romancer's work of which we have spoken, and partly from a theory, boldly propounded, that it needs a long history and "a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion." Hawthorne himself shared, or seemed to share, this illusion, and wrote The Marble Faun, so inferior, with its foreign scene, to the New England romances, to prove the absurdity of it. As a romancer, the twelve years of boyhood which he spent in the wild solitudes of Maine were probably of greater advantage to him than if they had been passed at Eton and Oxford. At least, until some other civilization has produced a romantic genius at all comparable to his, we must believe this. After leaving out all those novelistic "properties," as sovereigns, courts, aristocracy, gentry, castles, cottages, cathedrals, abbeys, universities, museums, political class, Epsoms, and Ascots, by the absence of which Mr. James suggests our poverty to the English conception, we have the whole of human life remaining, and a social structure presenting the only fresh and novel opportunities left to fiction, opportunities manifold and inexhaustible. No man would have known less what to do with that dreary and worn-out paraphernalia than Hawthorne.

We can only speak of the excellent comment upon Hawthorne's Old Home, and the skillful and manly way in which Mr. James treats of that delicate subject to his English audience. Skillful and manly the whole book is, — a miracle of tact and of self-respect, which the author need not fear to trust to the best of either of his publics. There is nothing to regret in the attitude of the book; and its literature is always a high pleasure, scarcely marred by some evidences of hurry, and such *writerish* passages as that in which *sin* is spoken of as "this baleful substantive with its attendant adjective."

It is a delightful and excellent essay, refined and delicate in perception, generous in feeling, and a worthy study of the unique romancer whom its closing words present with justice so subtle and expression so rich: —

"He was a beautiful, natural, original genius, and his life had been singularly exempt from worldly preoccupations and vulgar efforts. It had been as pure, as simple, as unsophisticated, as his work. He had lived primarily in his domestic affections, which were of the tenderest kind; and then — without eagerness, without pretension, but with a great deal of quiet devotion — in his charming art. His work will remain; it is too original and exquisite to pass away; among the men of imagination he will always have his niche. No one has had just that vision of life, and no one has had a literary form that more successfully expressed his vision. He was not a moralist, and he was not simply a poet. The moralists are weightier, denser, richer, in a sense; the poets are more purely incon-

clusive and irresponsible. He combined in a singular degree the spontaneity of the imagination with a haunting care for moral problems. Man's conscience was his theme, but he saw it in the light of a creative fancy which added, out of its own substance, an interest, and, I may almost say, an importance."

William Dean Howells, 'James's *Hawthorne*', *Atlantic Monthly*, 45 (1880), pp. 282–285.

JAMES'S HAWTHORNE.*

IT is a little singular, considering his vogue both contemporary and posthumous, that Hawthorne's place in literature should have been so long left to take care of itself, as it were. That it is an important place has never been disputed by any one, and by Americans at least he has for the past thirty or forty years been accepted as a prodigy in literature; as he was one of the few men of letters of indisputable genius we have had, perhaps with a patriotic people this could hardly have been otherwise. But the very fact of the abundant eulogy of him indicates that there has been a certain vagueness in the general admiration quite hostile to anything like serious criticism. At any rate no serious criticism of him has been written heretofore to any purpose, unless Mr. James would have us except Poe's; it has probably been a little difficult to secure the requisite perspective. Mr. James has thus in great measure had a virgin field. Another of his advantages is the evident ease he has experienced in getting far enough away from his subject not to be overpowered by its Titanic proportions. To many of his readers, indeed, much of his book will seem like detraction, and, we may suppose, will be cordially resented. We venture to think, however, not only that this will be unjust, but that Mr. James has made an important contribution to the literature of criticism in America, and that the fact will one day be recognized with the most effusiveness by the same persons who may now be cherishing irritation at his audacity in venturing to describe the features, instead of being content to worship at the shrine, of so august a divinity as Hawthorne. This at all events is what he has done. He has made a careful, conscientious and even vivid literary portrait, such as few of our own writers could have made, we may say with safety; and, we are tempted to add, such as no one of the eminent writers who have contributed to Mr. Morley's excellent series has made. Whatever its comparative value, it has the artistic advantage of being less formally a biography and more completely a criticism than any of its predecessors; it may, indeed, be said to be saturated with the essence of literary criticism, and to be a fine thing in itself. Barring the recurrence of a few stock phrases and a certain consciousness at the start, it is, as an example of what we mean by form, admirable; it is not a narrative of Hawthorne's life, nor an analytic examination of his works, nor a sequence of these succeeded by a formal summing up; its divisions are hardly noticeable, but its continuity is not wearisome, and it is not without the light and shade which the most harmonious instances of literary art sometimes lack. It is penetrated by its purpose, and, in a very graceful and charming way, its total effect is made to leave upon the reader the consistent and single impression with which it is clear the author sets out, and which he nowhere loses sight of either through carelessness or confusion.

This is high praise, certainly; but it is well considered, and there can

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* 'English Men of Letters. Edited by John Morley. Hawthorne. By Henry James, Jr.' London: Macmillan & Co.: New York: Harper & Brothers.

by this time be nothing extraordinary in highly praising Mr. James's literary art. What is here, however, of most importance is the worth of this impression of Hawthorne which he holds so firmly and conveys so clearly and charmingly. Mr. James's notion of the dignity of criticism is not, perhaps, an unusually high one for a critic of his intelligence and cultivation, but it is unusually distinct and unusually omnipresent. He never forgets his function and its claims upon him when he is engaged in the exercise of it. It happens from this sometimes that when these and the claims of his subject conflict—which is occasionally inevitable—the latter apparently get slighted. Considering how prevalent the contrary error is, insistence on this is not important. But to his respect for his office of critic the emphasis of his characterization of Hawthorne as "exquisitely provincial," and of the New England life which was Hawthorne's material as blank, are probably to be attributed. It is important to him that his vision be not obscured by the glamour of Hawthorne's reputation, that his standpoint should be that of "the world in general," and that he should describe him and his surroundings exactly as they are, without allowances, and with relation to the whole class of phenomena to which they belong, without personal or other prejudice. This is an admirable and, indeed, the only worthy critical attitude, though perhaps Mr. James assumes it with a little over-intensity and obviousness. But it is questionable if he would have so much to say of the provinciality of Hawthorne and the blankness of the old New England life if provinciality were not a good deal of a *bête-noire* to him. He speaks of the habit of Americans in Europe (page 148) "of keeping one eye, as it were, on the American personality, while with the other they contemplate" foreign institutions. It is possible that Mr. James himself has acquired the "habit" of keeping one eye on this spectacle; it is certain, at all events, that he is not to be caught napping. This is, however, fortunate for us, and we have sides of American life shown us which it is very wholesome for us to contemplate, and which a foreigner could neither persuade us were true nor exhibit so faithfully. But we ought not to get a wrong idea of the proportions of things: and though what Mr. James notes about New England and Hawthorne is true, and though he only notes it among many other qualities, it seems to us that he insists upon it a little too much—that, whatever the truth of the things he says, the tendency of them, the impression they leave, is a little too strong, and that following him here too implicitly would lead us astray. One asks himself, How important is it that Hawthorne was provincial? Did his provinciality in any way hamper his genius? Did it not rather assist it, or at least determine its fortunate direction? Still, in a complete portrait of the man it was by all odds worth pointing out; and if a great many admirers of Hawthorne, to whom he is a Titan of letters besides being an exquisite romancer, could have ascertained it in no other way—and we are not sure that they could—it was worth dwelling upon and reiterating.

We by no means agree, however, with Mr. James's regret concerning the blankness of Hawthorne's surroundings. On the contrary, it seems to

us an extremely lucky thing. Mr. James gives this striking picture of them (p. 42):

"No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities, nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot!"

To find his lines cast in these places would be an almost crushing thing for every romancer in literary history, perhaps, save Hawthorne. But Hawthorne is almost the only romancer who was not concerned with painting life at all. He was engaged, to use a phrase of Carlyle's concerning quite a different writer, "airily sketching out" certain currents in life, and this with a good deal of graceful disregard for anything but his own fancy. Mr. James is, on the other hand, passionately fond of life. He enjoys nothing so well as to assist ("as the French say," he would explain) at the spectacle of it. Elsewhere he regrets that Hawthorne has not left us "a picture of the Boston society of fifty years ago"; he notes Hawthorne's absence of realism and recurs to it again and again; he has a partiality for 'The House of the Seven Gables' because it is "pervaded with that vague hum, that indefinable echo, of the whole multitudinous life of man, which is the real sign of a great work of fiction"; the chief fault he finds with it is, that "Holgrave is not sharply enough characterized," that "he lacks features," and that "he is not an individual, but a type." Throughout the book he seems to regard Hawthorne as a novelist, at least to regard him from the novelist's standpoint. He has a long, an ingenious, and an interesting contrast of 'The Scarlet Letter' with Lockhart's novel 'Adam Blair,' for example, which seems to us quite amiss. So far from applying the standards of the novelist to the author of 'The Scarlet Letter,' we should instead have great doubts about calling his romances "novels" at all—except, perhaps, 'The Blithedale Romance.' If it be necessary to do this in order to distinguish Hawthorne in kind from the mass of the other great romancers it is eminently appropriate; and it may have been Mr. James's intention to do only this—it is evidently a question which he alone could decide; but we are obliged to judge from the impression he makes upon us, and that is of considering at much length the merits and shortcomings of Hawthorne in a sphere to which he conspicuously does not belong.

Perhaps this also results from Mr. James's notion of the dignity of criticism and respect for academic canons. The difficulty with too keen a sense of the worth of academic canons is, however, well understood; it is that the critic whose criteria are the usually excellent ones of "the world in general" is apt to miss something of the flavor of the individual genius he is considering, and not to be quite careful enough concerning the sureness of his sympathy. We have the word for it of so

sceptical a critic as Sainte-Beuve that sympathy is part of the necessary equipment of the critic; but it is quite true that it is a quality generally most insisted upon by the transcendental order of critics, and we should say that if anything jarred on Mr. James more than provincialism it was transcendentalism. He is probably so hostile to its essence that he has small respect for any of its dicta. At all events, his own method in literary criticism is, like his method in fiction, that of looking at the thing in question upon all sides, considering it in all its relations, describing it in detail, and representing it "as it is," from a strictly impersonal view-point—"objectively, as the metaphysicians say." This is admirable, when one feels sympathetically towards the thing in question, or, we may add, at the risk of making an unusual statement, towards its opposite. Now and then it has seemed to us Mr. James does not feel in either of these ways concerning his subjects, and in these instances he loses the pith of the matter. In the present work he speaks of Thoreau (page 94) in this way: "He was imperfect, unfinished, inartistic; he was worse than provincial—he was parochial. It is only at his best that he is readable," than which nothing, it seems to us, could be more unhappy. He means that Thoreau was unacademic, which is so true that it is almost a slip to speak of it; but surely one would be hard bestead to find anything more perfect, finished, and artistic than many things in the 'Week.' On the other hand, it is perhaps his intimate hostility to the whole spirit of the New England transcendental movement that leads him to speak thus of Margaret Fuller: "It is safe to assume that Hawthorne could not, on the whole, have had a high relish for the very positive personality of this accomplished and argumentative woman, in whose intellect high noon seemed ever to reign, as twilight did in his own. He must have been struck with the glare of her understanding, and, mentally speaking, have scowled and blinked a good deal in conversation with her." Again, the habit of relying upon one's observation, the being accustomed to see far more clearly and deeply than most people, inevitably begets an occasional careless trustfulness in itself.

It is due to both these reasons, we may infer, that Mr. James's account of Hawthorne fails in the respects in which it does fail. We cannot help thinking that if he had had a quicker sympathy with Hawthorne he would not have been so deeply impressed with Hawthorne's provinciality and the blankness of his surroundings, and he would not have omitted so conspicuously to consider the poetic quality of his writings. He once or twice refers to a poetic passage, and at the end he says, "he was not simply a poet," for "the poets are more purely inconclusive and irresponsible," which implies that he was a good deal of a poet. But here as elsewhere his poetry is referred to by implication and rarely, whereas his qualities as a novelist are mentioned directly and abundantly. Consistently, too, it is his poetic quality that Mr. James in a sort objects to; that is to say, one feels that he considers his fancifulness a limitation of his powers as a novelist. In many regards there has been no such just judgment of 'The Scarlet Letter' written.

But it is impossible to be quite satisfied with this: "The faults of the book are, to my sense, a want of reality and an abuse of the fanciful element—of a certain superficial symbolism." And he goes on:

"The people strike me not as characters, but as representatives, very picturesquely arrayed, of a single state of mind; and the interest of the story lies, not in them, but in the situation, which is insistently kept before us, with little progression, though with a great deal, as I have said, of a certain stable variation, and to which they, out of their reality, contribute little that helps it to live and move. . . . Lockhart was struck with the warmth of the subject that offered itself to him, and Hawthorne with its coldness . . . Hawthorne was a thin New-Englander, with a miasmatic conscience. The idea of the mystic A . . . should, I think, have been just made and dropped; . . . his enjoyment of it is puerile. . . . Hawthorne is perpetually looking for images which shall place themselves in picturesque correspondence with the spiritual facts with which he is concerned, and of course the search is of the very essence of poetry. But in such a process discretion is everything."

And in reviewing such a process, one feels impelled to add, ultra-discretion is dangerous. It almost calls for cordiality. In the review of 'The House of the Seven Gables' we find the same slight inadequacy. In the account of the 'Note Books,' after quoting "The aromatic odor of peat-smoke in the sunny autumnal air is very pleasant," Mr. James adds: "The reader says to himself that when a man turned thirty gives a place in his mind—and his inkstand—to such trifles as these, it is because nothing else of superior importance demands admission," and he laments afresh the "simple, democratic, thinly-composed society."

But when he ceases to object to Hawthorne's unsubstantiality *per se*, and to the extent to which it is sometimes pushed, and comes to consider generally the quality of his mind and the complexion of his temperament, he writes with a subtle felicity, and, at the same time, a certain wholesomeness, that are the mark of literary criticism of the first class. His portrait of Hawthorne discloses what we believe to be the truth about him, and, as we have said, this has never been formulated with any precision heretofore. On the one hand Hawthorne appears in this portrait a very different figure from the fiction conceived by M. Emile Montégut, who represents him, as he would perhaps be likely to appear to the Gallic imagination, as a *romancier pessimiste*. All that can be said in support of this Mr. James says is true "with a difference." Hawthorne was a *romancier pessimiste*, "minus the conviction." On the other hand, the popular American notion that he was a genuine Puritan, and that his books are, from the very fact of their poetic imaginativeness, valuable enforcements of the Puritan morality, important expositions of the Puritan code of ethics, as it were; that they emphasize the awfulness of sin, and its universality; and that the human conscience is treated in them with vivid realism, Mr. James very happily shows to be wholly beside the mark. One has only to think of the difference between 'Faust,' for example, and 'The Marble Faun' to see how different in

kind was Hawthorne's treatment of sin and the conscience from treatment so little "realistic" as even Goethe's. "Nothing is more curious and interesting," says Mr. James, "than this almost exclusively *imported* character of the sense of sin in Hawthorne's mind: it seemed to exist there merely for an artistic or literary purpose." That this purpose was not the reverse of trivial, however, no one will pretend. Just how serious it was, Mr. James intimates in the last sentence of his book, a sentence which, quite as much through what it suggests as what it states, defines Hawthorne's place almost with precision: "Man's conscience was his theme, but he saw it in the light of a creative fancy which added out of its own substance an interest, and I may almost say, an importance."

[Unsigned], 'James's "Hawthorne"', *Nation*, 30 (1880), pp. 80–81.