

## A Few Notes upon Mr. James

By Lena Milman

### I

To think of form as characteristic of emptiness, as though all spheres were bubbles, is an æsthetic heresy bequeathed to us by the Puritans who, as surely as they added to our national muscle, bereft us of a certain sensibility of touch. In their eyes, art was a mere concession to the bauble-loving folly of the crowd, and beauty itself was anathema to the wise few unless it clothed some grave moral teaching, which could not otherwise be made acceptable to the foolish many. Bunyan could not help but deck his parable in the beautiful prose of his day, but he would have scorned to bespangle it consciously with jewels of diction, and he could only shudder if he realised that Mercy and Greatheart spoke the same idiom as the players of Vanity Fair.

The contempt for the short story prevalent in England, but unknown elsewhere, is surely as traceable to Puritan influence as the mutilation of the Mary Altar at Ely, and of the shrine of Saint Thomas ; for, insisting, as it has become our English bent to do, upon some serious side-purpose in art, we are not content with a beautiful suggestion, with a sketch be it never so masterly ; the narrative must illustrate a principle, the picture, a fact. It is

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not yet ours to realise how the most exquisite in life are just those passing emotions, those elusive impressions which it behoves the artist to go seeking, over them so cunningly to cast his net of words or colour as to preserve the rapture of that emotion, that impression, for the delight of mankind for ever. We are too apt to regard the short story as the cartoon for a possible novel, whereas any elaboration of it is as thankless a process as the development of a fresco from an easel-painting. The treatment, the pigment, the medium, the palette are other from the very beginning. The rugged outline, which adds vigour to the fresco, could not be tolerated on canvas, the gem-like tones of the easel-painting would look blurred if transferred to the wall. Mr. James's pictures must be on the line; sky them, and it is not worth while to crane our necks for the modicum of pleasure they can afford. He has indeed written several books in the form of novels, but his method is too analytical, and we enjoy the stories much in the way we enjoy travelling over a picture with a microscope. We can detect no fault of technique; on the contrary, each movement of the glass reveals some new beauty, some wonder of skill; but we are conscious all the while that, as a whole, the work is a failure. The "American" is an example of this. The characterisation is masterly, the observation unerring, and yet Newman's passion carries no conviction with it, although the story treats of its dawn, its noon, its setting.

Distinction, of all qualities the one most rare in young writers, brought Mr. James's work instant recognition, and his personality was from the very first so clearly stamped upon his writing that it is nowhere more marked than in a story printed as early as 1871: "A Passionate Pilgrim." Not only does every page reveal him as "enamoured of literary form," (we quote from "The Middle Years,") but also as full of love, both for his own countrymen

countrymen and for England—a love none the less real because so undemonstrative that superficial observers describe him as cosmopolitan. In one so guiltless of Chauvinism as Mr. James, it is surely not a little charming to find how rarely the exigencies of narrative induce him to portray his own country-people in a light altogether unamiable. Her innocence, her untimely death, forbid us to think lightly even of that type of frivolity, Miss Annie P. Miller; and of all Mr. James's portraits of women, surely the most lovable is that of Euphemia Cleve, afterwards "Madame de Mauves." So great, indeed, is his love for England, his appreciation of things English, that he would fain persuade himself that it is shared by his countrymen in general:

"The latent preparedness of the American mind for even the most characteristic features of English life is a fact I never have got to the bottom of. The roots of it are so deeply buried in the soil of our early culture, that without some great upheaval of experience it would be hard to say when and where and how it begins. It makes an American's enjoyment of England an emotion more intimate, as the French say, than his enjoyment, for instance, of Italy or Spain."

With a delightful style, a facile invention, a wide culture, what writer could be better equipped than Mr. James?

Alas, that he must write for a generation upon whom two at least of these qualities are as though they were not! Alas, that it should be the concurrence of illiterate opinion, (an opinion often then most illiterate when most elegantly uttered,) that constitutes popularity! The select multitude that surges up Belgravian staircases, that larger one that spends its holidays among the bowers of Rosherville, agree in preferring "Claudian" to "Hamlet," Mr. Jerome's humour to Elia's, Mr. Ellis Roberts's adaptations to Mr. Watts' portraits. There are certain elementary emotions,  
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there are certain melodramatic situations, of which they never tire; and a writer who prefers to tell of subtle emotions, of bloodless situations, whose reputation, moreover, does not chiefly rest upon one of those respectable monuments of British industry, novels in three volumes, will never see his works stacked high upon the bookstalls. If, like Mr. James, he is further hampered by a tender literary conscience, which makes him reverent and temperate in the use of words, which hinders him from writing even daintily of things foul, it will go even harder with him, since he cannot hope for a place on that index which has made so many reputations in the marring.

“*La qualité la plus rare chez la femme,*” says Balzac, “*c’est une certaine gaieté qui n’altère point la tendresse,*” and surely the rarity may be predicated of other than women, of whole communities indeed. To steer between the Scylla of flippancy on the one hand, and the Charybdis of sentimentality on the other, is given to but few. It is such a perfection of taste, as one would expect an ancient civilization to produce; and, lo! an example of it, a very apostle of form, comes to us over the Atlantic, beyond whose wave the forefathers of his race sought immunity from form, civil and religious.

## II

It is as difficult to express the charm of an individual style in words other than the author’s own as to convey that of music without a snatch of illustrative melody; and this is especially true of a style which, like that of Mr. James, expresses an exquisite sense of fitness rather than a musical ear. It is not that his epigram is ever discordant, but rather that his system of short, closed sentences does not lend itself to flowing cadence.

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He is the least self-conscious of writers, but surely when, in "The Middle Years," he describes Duncombe as "a passionate corrector, a fingerer of style," he lets slip an autobiographical detail; and, indeed, supposing all other sources of information to be closed to us, we might construct a tolerably correct biography of Mr. James from the evidence of his works. We might detect, for instance, his American birth and education in his idiom, his Celtic blood in his satire, his sympathy with English convention in his dainty morality, his intimate knowledge of French in his lapses of Gallicism.

With provincial France, indeed, where the poplars twinkle beside the white ways, he is as familiar as are but two of our English writers, Miss Thackeray and Mr. Wedmore; and with Paris too he is acquainted, not only in those her obvious aspects which opulent but illiterate youth can learn superficially in a week or so, but also as the Paris beyond Seine that lounges in the shade of the Luxembourg chestnut-trees, that saunters through the book-lined arcades of the Odeon, that hides its dignity in the bastion-like palaces of the Faubourg Saint Germain; the Paris that displays its wealth in the Parc Monceaux, that flaunts its poverty on the Buttes Chaumont.

Occasionally Mr. James's unremitting warfare against the Obvious, whether of epithet or of incident, has misled him into artificiality. He should remember that whereas the Obvious in life is always the most easily attainable, in art, convention has so fenced it round as to place it almost out of reach, and that sometimes startling effect is best produced by perfect simplicity of phrase. We cannot recall any passage in Mr James's stories as poignant as poor wandering Clifford's cry in the "House of the Seven Gables":

"I want my happiness! Many, many years have I waited for it!

it! It is late! it is late! I want my happiness." And yet Hawthorne worked within far narrower limits than does the author of "Washington Square."

Mr. James's descriptive passages are as vividly impressionist as his characters are subtly analytical, and it is perhaps for this reason that they best exhibit the charm of his style. It is no mere word-painting. This cant-phrase but ill expresses the magic of words able to convey not merely colour but the scent and sound and movement which, welded together, form one idea. Who that knows Paris will not testify to the accuracy of observation displayed in this description of a characteristic scene at the Comédie Française?

"The foyer was not crowded; only a dozen groups were scattered over the polished floor, several others having passed out to the balcony which overhangs the square of the Palais Royal. The windows were open, the brilliant lights of Paris made the dull summer evening look like an anniversary or a revolution; a murmur of voices seemed to come up from the streets, and even in the foyer one heard the slow click of the horses and the rumble of the crookedly-driven fiacres on the hard, smooth asphalt."

But Mr. James has another manner, of which the following is a sample. Surely Gautier himself never wrote more gracefully of travel:

"In so far as beauty of structure is beauty of line and curve, balance and harmony of masses and dimensions, I have seldom relished it as deeply as on the grassy nave of some crumbling church, before lonely columns and empty windows, where the wild flowers were a cornice and the sailing clouds a roof. The arts certainly have a common element. These hoary relics of Glastonbury reminded me in their broken eloquence of one of the other great ruins of the world—the Last Supper of Leonardo. A  
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beautiful shadow, in each case, is all that remains; but that shadow is the artist's thought."

## III

In one of Mr. James's earlier stories we read of a young German who has heard of the population of the United States as being "a highly humorous people." The author may or may not concur in this opinion, but certainly his own vein of humour is as far removed as possible from that usually regarded as typically American, and it may be that, in crediting his countrymen with an exclusive appreciation for the exaggerated burlesque of their most popular writers, we do them the same injustice they do us who conceive of our being moved to mirth by that humour known as the "New."

Mr. James's humour is like Miss Austen's, in being so entirely a part of the texture that it is almost as difficult to detach an illustrative fragment as to cut a pattern from one of those fabrics which we are advised to "see in the piece." And, spite of what we have said of his being chiefly successful as a short-story writer, it is perhaps in one of his shorter novels, "Washington Square," that his humour is best exemplified. The character indeed of Aunt Penniman, always advising, but always ill-advised, is worthy a place beside the immortal aunts who watched over Maggie Tulliver and the thrifty Aunt Norris of "Mansfield Park." We read of Aunt Penniman that "Her manners were strange and formidable, and her mourning robes—she dressed in black for twenty years after her husband's death, and then suddenly appeared one morning with pink roses in her cap—were complicated in odd, unexpected places with buckles, bugles, and pins, which discouraged familiarity.

familiarity. She took children too hard both for good and evil, and had an oppressive air of expecting subtle things of them, so that going to see her was a good deal like being taken to church and made to sit in a front pew."

But Mrs. Penniman was as romantic as she was inaccurate ("it must be delightful," she said, "to think of those who love us among the ruins of the Pantheon"), and it needed but the attentions of an heiress-hunting young man to convert the poor little heroine of the story, weak at every point save her affections, unattractive, ungifted, into a heroine of romance in her aunt's eyes, the father's opposition only making the situation more dramatic, and—"Mrs. Penniman's real hope was that the girl would make a secret marriage, at which she should officiate as brideswoman or duenna. She had a vision of this ceremony being performed in some subterranean chapel—subterranean chapels in New York were not frequent, but Mrs. Penniman's imagination was not chilled by trifles—and of the guilty couple—she liked to think of poor Catherine and her suitor as the guilty couple—being shuffled away in a fast whirling vehicle to some obscure lodging in the suburbs, where she would pay them (in a thick veil) clandestine visits, where they would endure a period of romantic privation, and where ultimately, after she should have been their earthly providence, their intercessor, their advocate, and their medium of communication with the world, they should be reconciled to her brother in an artistic tableau, in which she herself should be, somehow, the central figure."

But apart from the context, deprived of the contrast afforded her by the matter-of-fact sincerity of her niece, the dry perspicuity of her brother, Aunt Penniman's figure cannot be made to stand as firmly as in the novel. Indeed, humour is so volatile a thing, the perception of it requires so delicate a sensibility, that the mood  
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cannot be maintained, except by that transition from grave to gay, from gay to grave, which is the whole art of the story-teller as of the dramatist.

The peculiar humour whose sparks are struck by the clash of nationalities in European hotels and *pensions* has surely never been so deftly distilled as in the "Bundle of Letters." Miss Miranda Hope, of Bangor, Maine, "decorated all over with beads and bracelets and embroidered dandelions," whose travelling "for general culture" obliges her to go to a Paris theatre unattended, and who there sees "plenty of other ladies alone (mostly French);" the æsthetic youth from Boston, who talks of a real "Corot Day," and who paints "for the knowledge that leaves a trace—that leaves strange scars and stains and reveries behind it;" the English girl who describes the landlady as "*exceedingly foreign*;" the landlady's cousin, who enjoys free board and lodging so long as he keeps "an eye on the grammatical eccentricities of the *pensionnaires*," are all equally typical, and yet none of them lack that touch which makes them human as well as humorous.

To sustain humour as long as he is in the mood, without once lapsing into caricature—this is what Mr. James has essayed to do, and has done admirably.

#### IV

There is another side to Mr. James's genius—a side of whose existence they never reckon who are content to know him merely as the social satirist of "Daisy Miller" and "A Bundle of Letters"—a side which links him with his great compatriots Poe and Hawthorne—a way, namely, of setting his characters in an atmosphere of the supernatural with so admirable a skill as never by over-statement to impel the reader to scepticism. The little story,

story, "Sir Edmund Orme," is an example of this. The ghost of Sir Edmund is invisible to all but two persons, and all that these two have in common is a great love for one woman—a love so great that, as we read, it seems almost natural that it should suffice to rarefy mortal sense and extend its range beyond things of matter. There is something, too, of this mystical element in "The Madonna of the Future," although here the question is not of the dead appearing, but of one whose gaze is so constantly fixed upon the ideal that the real becomes a shadow. It is the story of Don Quixote over again, but, in place of the knight, we have Theobald, the poor artist, in place of Dulcinea, his model Serafina, whose virtue, whose beauty is as imaginary as was that of her Spanish prototype. The scene is laid in the Florence of to-day—that Florence whose hotel windows look out upon Arno's bank, where Dante's gaze first lit upon Beatrice, where the shrine of Our Lady of the Flower is thronged by a cosmopolitan crowd who refuse her homage. And upon this background, mediæval in outline but modern in every detail, the little wan figure of the artist stands out, imaginary no doubt as an individual, but typical of how much pathos, of how much high endeavour! There are some to whom Quixote himself is merely a caricature; there are others to whom he recalls a singleness of aim, a tender sensibility, an undaunted courage which was once theirs. They are wiser now: they have seen how ridiculous is vain effort, how contemptible a figure he cuts who sets himself a task beyond his strength, and yet . . . But in this vein Mr. James has never done better than in the "Altar of the Dead." The many will never so much as read it—the many who can only read stories which they can imagine of the "people over the way;" but to the few who grieve when the Master is content to do merely well what he can do exquisitely, this last story comes as a pledge of yet further possibilities,

bilities, a promise of further progress towards perfection. It tells of one who "had entered that dark defile of our earthly descent in which some one dies every day"—one, the keynote of whose nature was constancy—one who could forgive all except betrayal. So, in the recesses of his heart, he reared an altar to the memory of "the Others," as he called the dead. For a time this sufficed, but one day he chanced to enter "a temple of the old persuasion," and the idea struck him of dedicating a material altar to those with whose memory he would some day link his own. So it came to be a great joy to him to see the faithful participating in his devotion for the Others, although none but he knew what souls they were in memory of whose mortal life the tapers burned, the flowers bloomed. Soon his altar boasted a devotee even more constant than himself—a woman came to kneel there whose devotion to the others was more absorbing than his. The altar grew more and more radiant as the founder's friends grew fewer; the woman still came to kneel there, and one day the founder learned that her thoughts were all of One, and that One the only friend of his who, proving false, had never been commemorated by flower or taper.

## V

Again and again does Mr. James recur to the fatal effect of importunate society upon talent, an effect not always the less fatal when the claims of society are tempered by those of domesticity. Neil Paraday, "the Lion," is hustled to his grave by interviewers and ladies eager for prey as any Tartarin; Henry St. George, "the Master," squanders his talent by writing for money with which to meet his wife's housekeeping expenses and his boys' school-bills; Mark Ambient, "the author of 'Beltraffio,'"

traffo,'” lives to see his wife prefer their only child should die rather than live to read his father's works. This last story, by the way, is one of those in which the author has so far stepped aside to avoid the Obvious as to stray into the Abnormal. But be the stories what they may (and to our thinking two of them are among Mr. James's best), they have afforded the author so many incidental opportunities for self-revelation as to be exceptionally interesting to the student of his work. Listen for instance to Mark Ambient's address to his young disciple :

“Polishing one's plate—that is, the torment of execution, the effort to arrive at a surface—if you think a surface necessary—some people don't, happily for them! My dear fellow, if you could see the surface I dream of—as compared with the one with which I have to content myself. Life is really too short for art—one hasn't time to make one's shell ideally hard. Firm and bright—firm and bright!—the devilish thing has a way sometimes of being bright without being firm . . . there are horrible little flabby spots where I have taken the second-best word, because I couldn't for the life of me think of the best.”

Flaubert lay awake, the guilt of a double genitive lying heavy upon his conscience. We can imagine Mr. James haunted by the fear of an epithet misplaced. For to this longing for perfection of form, there is also constant reference in “The Lesson of the Master.” “The sense of having done the best,” says St. George, “the sense which is the real life of the artist and the absence of which is his death, of having drawn from his intellectual instrument the finest music that nature had hidden in it, of having played it as it should be played.”

“In every son of woman,” says Mr. James, in one of his early stories, “there are two men—the practical man and the dreamer. We live for our dreams—but meanwhile we live by  
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our wits. When the dreamer is a poet, the other fellow is an artist."

English restricts the title of poet to writers of verse, but what is poetry but a fusion of life with dream, of dream with life? And is not he who can supply the requisite heat a poet, be his emotion expressed in stone or chord, colour or spoken words?

"The thing is to have made somebody care," says Duncombe, in "The Middle Years." There are many on either side of the Atlantic to tell Mr. James that he has succeeded at least in this.