

Henry James

..... His Spirit of Adventure .....

Introduction

Kazuya Kamimura

The Order of Merit that Henry James received from King George V, just before he died in the fullness of years and just after he was naturalized as an English subject, must have been a particularly reassuring honour to this novelist: he had long been making a pilgrimage to the place where the exploring and somewhat perturbed mind might be at peace, and had found his eternal seat of life not in his native country but in Chelsea in England, but he was in such a dangerous state of mind when he heard that the World War I was being waged on the European continent, and he was approaching the time of his death and his belief in the human being was at stake; and he might not be unaware of his small audience and may have had some feeling of bitterness, though with some pompousness he seems to have been indifferent to the public concern in his work. The popularity of James began to grow with "Daisy Miller" and culminated with "The Portrait of a Lady" in the latter half of the 19th century and seems ever since to have been as much on the decline as his subsequent years proved prolific and it may possibly be said that his popularity was at its nadir about the time of his death. This state of unpopularity lasted till the time came of the re-evaluation of his work with the advent of the centennial anniversary of his birth.

There is, in truth, little in his work to flatter the vanities and the cheap heroisms of the great mass; no escape into a fairyland such as is offered in Sir James Barrie; none of the abject sentimentality whatsoever as in, say, Goldsmith; and none again of the forceful pungency of satire for which some authors are conspicuous who shall pass unnamed. In Henry James, moreover, there is a

kind of innate limitation of the qualities that he, merely by his peculiar inclination, could not avoid being on the side of the classes as opposed to the masses. But his strong assurance of the validity of his work and his passion for it had so strong a hold on his mind as to cause him to deny his long life of seventy-four years the alluring experience and happiness of matrimony and to devote his celibate life to the practice of novel writing. The great efforts he made during his long literary life rich in good products were at long last crowned with the highest honours which were shared by George Meredith, a one time friend of Henry James. Besides, he left behind him a long shelf of works for an appreciative posterity to read, works in which his deep humanity causes the reader to feel uplifted and often make him feel that his life is open to some reconsiderations. So far as he can be judged, he is sure of a permanent place among those who are of similar disposition and try to look at the process of life from the spiritual or psychological point of view and feel the complacency and sincerity of the long-established mind and among those who are practitioners of the study of literature, especially in the line of the artship of the novel, though, no doubt, there now and then is raised and will ever be raised a voice of scrupulous aloofness from the animal human being and of the absurd crabbedness of style resulting from his careful and elaborate analysis of the psychological phenomenon of man. André Gide, for example, said about James's fictitious characters that "they are only winged busts, all the weight of the flesh is absent, all the shaggy tangled undergrowth, all the wild darkness". Somerset Maugham is also adversely

critical of James for similar reasons. And, as F. W. Dupee pointed out, "James himself seems to have acknowledged the limitation when at the peril of retroactively compromising his portrait of Isabel, he shows her fleeing from Goodwood's kiss", the only kiss in the long love story of over six hundred pages (though I dare not say "compromising his portrait of Isabel"). But, though we can not repudiate these derogatory opinions with so much flatness, we never find ourselves tempted to read him the less. In point of fact, Henry James was doomed from the start to be such an exclusive writer as can never help putting himself forward so conspicuously in the eye of the reader that his idiosyncrasies tell us the plain truth that merits are often on all fours with demerits. So we can not throw away his work merely because of his "nothingness", his "lack of interest", and his "magnificent pretensions with petty performances" of which it is often accused. His work has a great many redeeming features; sincere and deliberate attitude toward life, and the real, though limited, description of it, the superb sense of morality, the amplitude of mind recognized in his wit and humour in dialogues of his fiction works; and the novel itself as a perfect art quite worthy of every inch "the novelist", as James is often called. His work, such being the case, admits of no evasion and equivocation as to whether one likes it or not. Some like it immensely and others do not know of any book of his other than "Daisy Miller" or "The Portrait of a Lady" or if I dare to add one more book, "The Ambassadors." And moreover, even among those who are James's appreciative readers, there is to be acknowledged a considerable difference in their attempt to know what period it is that evinces the best qualities of James, or in what point he is or is not a good novelist and, after all, whether he is a great novelist or not. And also there has not yet been fixed list of James's books that are universally granted to be his masterpieces. A G. M. Sinclair says that we Japanese students, in order to read his later novels, must know English fully as well as we do our mother tongue and, even

when we are qualified enough in that point, we should work up to these great novels by mastering the earlier ones. So I here shirk from that line of approach, thinking that it would rather be an indiscreet venture to put forth whatever opinion I form in this incompetent state of my reading of his books. I feel rather that to show some authoritative opinions would serve well as a consolation for my inability. Previous to that, I must tell a little about his creative career.

James, as is often the case with the so-called prolific writer, exhibited remarkable vicissitude and variety in his long career as a novel-writer. To explain this it is helpful and is an academic convention to divide his career into three periods and in each of them to find respective peculiarity and quality. The first period (1865-1882) is that of his apprenticeship and yet of his success in the way of bringing him out into the world as a cosmopolitan writer. He dealt with Americans in Europe and conversely with Europeans in America and described the shade of thought and emotion caused by different manners and habits, thus "the international theme" came to represent this period. Some chief products of this period are "Roderick Hudson," "The American," "Daisy Miller," "The Portrait of a Lady," and they will remain the favorite books of James with all his appreciative readers who believe that he became verbose in his old age. The delightful lucidity of his style and purity of romance are a kind of measure of the works of this period. These years ended with a high climax and at the same time with the fade-out of his international colour. The second period (1882-1895) is the time when he took to writing short stories in earnest. Chief products are "The Aspern Papers," "The Death of the Lion," "The Author of the Dead," and "The Pupil." James here, setting aside for a while the international subject turned his eye to the more intimate and immediate aspect of human relationship or the microcosmic world where nationality matters little. This interest in the conflicts of the inner world of his fictitious characters becomes keener and more general, general in the sense that it is deep enough to have the common

objects of observation likely to be understood by every people. And the society in which the individual gets involved becomes more important as an arena where the interest or will of the individual runs counter to that of the society. "His style also shows a marked progress toward economy of words and ornateness of the sentence. Its beauty is a strange mixture of spontaneity of thought and the contextual elaboration." To appreciate this, it suffices to read any book of this period just after reading the earlier ones, for example, "The Altar of the Dead" after "The Passionate Pilgrim." The last period begins about with "The Spoils of Poynton" (1896), followed by "What Maisie Knew," "The Turn of a Screw," "The Awkward Age." But the most consummate work of this time is a trilogy. "The Ambassadors." "The Wings of the Dove" and "The Golden Bowl." Here apart from the importance of content, his art of fiction is said to have been effected to its highest degree, and as a result of which it has become the target of great controversies. Critics never talk about James without referring to the later James whether as an improved writer or not. In any case "the reader at first will find himself lost in the maze of the author's style," but by paying strained attention constantly, "he will find him intellectually formal and deeply moving."

So much for the talk about his literary career. Now for the evaluation of his work. This task, however, is so difficult that I want to be permitted to mention only the following fact: Messrs. Van Wyck Brooks, Somerset Maugham and F. R. Leavis make much of his earlier works rather than his later ones, while Messrs. F. O. Matthiessen, F. W. Dupee and Leon Edel do not hesitate to mention his trilogy as James's masterpiece. Besides James wrote so many good short stories that are often said to be of equal worth and contain the same peculiarities as found in his novels, this problem, therefore, is made the more insolvable. So it seems wise to me, since I can not pretend to have read his "convoluted style" well, that I do not attempt to deal with any particular book and to try to estimate the

respective importance of its position among other works and thereby do some kind of comparative study of them. Rather I have chosen to take James as he is—as a thinking novelist—and to evaluate him from the point of the content, not of the form or style. The present author, such as he is, does not go beyond the explanation of the substance of his work on the whole or giving the impressions of it of which this paper shall be composed.

James's implicit belief in the rich personal life is no doubt a keynote to the reading of his work and his personal life is unfolded through the psychology of the individual. "Subjective passions, converted into objective things; that is, stories and novels in James, worked within him upon a thousand relations and ramifications of intense living." This sense of intense living was particularly with him a kind of inveterate preoccupation. The work of James seems to cry out for some divine answer; "What is intense living"? For James richness of personal life is that of psychological experience. And that experience is always looked upon from this point of view. His fiction works feed upon the passions and emotions as upon a source of vital good and of vital evil. Though it may not be immune from the charge of strained explanation, the fact that in James's work, there are few elaborate descriptions for merely description's sake, for example, descriptions of nature and of the common settings his characters appear in and that his characters never come to be overawed by nature, as in the works of Thomas Hardy, seems to be a supreme but it may be possibly oblique testimony of how the idea he wanted to delineate brought about this extreme concentration upon the inner world of unsuspected width and depth. He knew himself too well not to confine himself to this method of literary creation. In a sense the fact that he, never during his long literary life, seems to have had a hard time on account of the exhaustion of his ideas is another supreme example of his strong egotism. The materials for his purpose are no doubt timelessly boundless, because anybody can at any time come his way.

It does not demand any extraordinary or singular experiences on the part of the author. In point of fact, James preferred the ordinary to the extraordinary and the near to the far. The germ ideas for his novels and stories were usually picked up or hinted to him at dinner parties or other public meetings in conversations with his friends and acquaintances. "The Aspern Papers" is, for example, from the story James heard told of an American art critic who discovered that some letters of Shelley and Byron were kept in the hands of two ladies in Florence. I think that "The Spoils of Poynton" is not an exception either. I believe some other examples will easily be found in "The Note-book of Henry James." Only let me requote what Mr. Matthiessen supposes to be the James's typical short entry of idea. It reads: "Note here next (no time today) the 2 things old Lady Stanley told me the other day that the former Lady Holland had said to her, and the admirable subject suggested to me yesterday, Sunday, at Mrs. Meune's by Mrs. Lynn Linton's (Mrs. J's) talk about F. H. the man marrying for money to serve him for a great political career & public end." Besides James can not conceive many new ideas and the limited number of ideas he conceives are common ones. The felicitous remark of Mr. Stevenson will suffice:-

James had not so many different ideas. His stories are variations upon the theme of the individual and society ..... He used as the motive power of his narrative the basic passions of common human nature, the loves, hates, jealousies and prides, only modified as to the form they take by the circumstance of their existing in a complex civilization. His novels have the dimensions of breadth and depth. Although there are not so many different themes from novel to novel, within each James flashes at the reader many facets of the one idea. It is as if he turned the jewel of his idea from side to side so that its variety of lights shines out, one succeeding the other. And in each novel there is a depth of significance. He had the metapho-

rical sense to an unusual degree. In his stories one thing stands for another. There is a conscious as well as a natural and unconscious use of symbols: and there is also a suggestion of the way meaning gets into common objects and comes to stand for more than meets the eye. In the end the world of the novel seems to stand for the great world of life with the author as the god of the small world. One way of considering these stories is to see them as they partake of the horizontal and vertical dimensions. One can observe first the reaction of ideas upon ideas, character upon character, action upon action, and the flashing out of moral and aesthetic lights as the author turns the situation from side to side. And one can hold the jewel still and look into it and sound it for its meaning.

This is well said. James, with all his limited materials and ideas, made up a fine world of art where the vibration of life is felt immensely. Without his excellent powers in the analysis of the psychological phenomena, it would be impossible and so much more so, so long as his richness of life is richness of mind.

James's work, it is needless to say, is also an endorsement of his literary theory, and it seems most genuinely so. It is, as you are now able to suppose, deeply rooted in the belief that a novel should be the direct representation of life, impression of life and perception of life. "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life," is James's remark. He, therefore, could not help telling us with hot displeasure in his "The Art of Fiction" as follows; "I was lately struck in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular; in a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he and his trusting friend are only making believe. He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime; it is

what I mean by the attitude of apology, and it struck me every whit as much in Trollope as it would have shocked me in Gibbon, or Macaulay. In James's effort to write what has every possibility of the real happening there is in a sense something in common with the attempt of French naturalists and realists in the 19th century. The sympathy and friendship he showed during his sojourn in Paris with Flaubert, Maupassant, Zola and other followers of the doctrine of the school, must have been not a little quickened by his own constant devotion to it. But he could not whole-heartedly be in sympathy with them. Indeed, James was a realist so far as he has the truth-telling mind, so much so that some critics called him a scientist in literature by which they mean an observer, a recorder of facts, a "tabulator." But he was too artistic, too decently aristocratic to present his findings as a statistician. They were not of the photographic kind; he selected and selected. To James, unlike a disciple of Zolaesque realism, art is not a mere transcription of life, "life being all inclusion and confusion, while art being all discrimination and selection." The art of fiction demands the rearrangement of the authorial experiences, because the artist can not portray the whole of life without making his picture formless and meaningless. In a letter to the Summer School held at a certain place in America for a discussion of the art of novel, James stated: "oh, do something from your point of view; an ounce of examples is worth a ton of generalities; do something with the great art and the great form; do something with life. Any point of view is interesting that is a direct impression of life." The great art and the great form may be taken as an equivalent to the said discrimination. Indeed with James this commitment to a high degree of discrimination and selection has no doubt much to do with what is called his method of the point of view. He believes that if the authority of a novel is that of an omniscient author the range of inclusion may be distressingly large and the fictional pattern less sharp and clear and so he, rejecting this authorial

omniscience, tried to tell his stories from the point of view of a single character. The author, therefore, places himself within a sanctum of a single character. Here we remember his realism and we are convinced that his realism is not an exterior but an interior one. It is never concerned with any moving accidents by land and sea. In his preface to "The Portrait of a Lady" which is the study of Isabel Archer's experience, James states his chief intentions of the novel, which are to show what an exciting inward life may do for the person leading it even while it remains perfectly normal. "The Portrait," says he, "is a representation simply of her noiselessly seeing; and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her art as interesting as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate." Nothing is so important as what is going on within a sensitive and responsive mind. The process of growth in consciousness constitutes experience for James and experience in this sense to him and to his readers who have come to share this view, is essential reality of human life, and the only reality that matters to him. Therefore James's characters are all persons of character and his plots play upon a moral choice made by a person endowed with a courage and instinct for what is right, for what is divine. His experience is, as it were, an accumulation of moral conflicts between the bad and the good, expansion and contraction. I will dwell upon this moral conflict in the last chapter of this paper.

Another important fact about James's work or about himself is its internationally cosmopolitan nature. As an American, he came to Europe, where he enjoyed a series of casual educational and social experiences and acquired the habit of looking at the form of life from a variety of national and cultural perspectives. These circumstances provided him with an unorthodox kind of background for the writing of a novel. And his frequent travels in Europe made him from his tender age aware of the interrelationship of American and European social and moral form. In a letter to T. S. Perry, a life-long friend of James, he said (in 1867):-

We are Americans born ...il faut en prendre son parti. I look upon it as a great blessing; and I think that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically &c) claim our property wherever we find it. To have no national stamp has hitherto been a regret and a drawback, but I think it not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate that a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various National tendencies of the world is the condition of more important achievements than any we have seen. We must of course have something of our own ..... something distinctive and homogeneous ..... and I take it that we shall find it in our moral consciousness, our unprecedented spiritual lightness and vigour.

James's attitude toward nationality must always be viewed in the light of its moral consciousness.

He is in a sense a man who was obsessed throughout his life with a sort of complex for the poor culture of his own country and who, after leading the long life of an exile, settled himself in England. But there remained in his negative mind the patriotic feeling toward his native country for its moral vitality and its naiveté on which he had looked with considerable favour.

James's fiction is concerned with three major themes as R. P. Blackmur defined them; they are the international theme, the artist in conflict with society, and the theme of pilgrim in search of society. And in other words it may be said that the edifying aspiration for the European civilization, the preference for the American innocence to the depravity of Europe and the freedom of spirit which is thrown into relief, confronted with difficulties of moral solution are the basic thoughts or ideas which are modified or developed in those themes above mentioned. So I will take them up in the following three chapters to each of which is given my tentative title "Europe," "Privacy" and "The Spirit of Adventure."

1. Edel, Leon : Henry James: A Pamphlet on American Writers No. 4.
2. Edel, Leon : Henry James. The Untried Years.
3. Matthiessen, F.O. : Henry James : The Major Phase.
4. Dupee, F.W. : Henry James.
5. Stevenson : The Crooked Corridor.