

Why Henry James still matters

Not everyone will find a haven in his work. But his magnificently eloquent body of work challenges us and repays the effort

BY PHILIP HORNE

For many of us, lockdown has meant an even more intense immersion in the media whirl of rolling news and politics, an addictive torrent of speculation, opinion and partial revelation, appealing to the prejudices of one side or another and manipulatively subjecting us to the temptations of “confirmation bias”. But we can also come to feel a revulsion from so fast-shifting, so unrewardingly strident a world, and seek a connection with wiser, more equivocal, durably nourishing voices—without wanting to retreat too much into old fixed categories, or become in T.S. Eliot’s phrase “assured of certain certainties”. Not everyone will find their much-needed haven in the work of Henry James, perhaps. But if we want a highly intelligent, deeply felt, psychologically astute, ironically self-questioning, magnificently eloquent body of work to challenge and repay a sustained effort of attention on our part—well, you couldn’t do better.

James told a widowed friend in 1904 he saw one vital function of the novel as relieving loneliness:

... the more one goes on the more one sees that the creation, the projection and evocation by hook or by crook, of some human and personal good company, for the mind and imagination of one’s readers ... is as kind a turn as one can render.

His fiction demands—and rewards—a sustained act of attention that stands in opposition to a world—to cite Eliot again—“distracted by distraction from distraction”. He told his friend the Duchess of Sutherland in 1903:

Take, meanwhile, pray, the *Ambassadors* very easily & gently: read five pages a day—be even as deliberate as that—but *don’t break the thread*. The thread is really stretched quite scientifically tight. Keep along with it step by step—& then the full charm will come out.

The charm of a James novel is an intense experience.

James’s precedent meant a lot to the early Ezra Pound, who in 1918 discerned in the Master—I think correctly—“the major James, ... the hater of tyranny; book after early book against oppression, against all the sordid petty personal crushing oppression, the domination of modern life”. For Pound’s friend Eliot (see his poem “Portrait of a Lady”), James’s late tales were an early model, as he rather grudgingly conceded, looking back from 1935: “One learnt something, no doubt, from Henry James, and might have learnt more.” Virginia Woolf, in her 1920 diary, recorded after a talk with Eliot that “A personal upheaval of some kind came after Prufrock, & turned him aside from his inclination—to develop in the manner of Henry James.” James has meant a good deal to other poets—to Marianne Moore, W.H.



Henry James: *One function of the novel is to relieve loneliness*

Auden, Delmore Schwartz, for example—and even more to novelists, such as Elizabeth Bowen, Philip Roth, Alan Hollinghurst (who admires “his double mastery ... Both his insight into human behaviour and his deep interest in the novel as a form”).

When in 2018 I recruited a group of major contemporary novelists, including Jonathan Coe, Tessa Hadley, Paul Theroux and Rose Tremain, to contribute to *Tales from a Master’s Notebook: Stories Henry James Never Wrote*, they found inspiration in James’s wonderful notebooks, where he left private records of his ideas for stories, dozens of which remained unattempted at his death. Most of the writers brought James’s situations into the present, which involved a fascinating negotiation between his time and ours. Joseph O’Neill, author of “Netherland”, told the *New Yorker*, with reference to his fine story “The Poltroon Husband”, that “Rifling through the ideas of an immortal as if they were one’s own is uncanny and exhilarating ... James’s ideas are very interesting, needless to say—packed with latent drama and very fresh, even though they’re more than a century old.” In all the stories there was an exciting dialogue between James’s time and ours—a proof that James still matters.

But you don’t have to be a writer to savour James, whose appeal to readers (as indeed to film-makers) is manifold: his great horror story *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) manages, as he hoped, to “reek with the air of Evil”; his novella *The Aspern Papers* ▶

(1888) magnificently evokes Venice, but also sharply dramatises the problematic relation between editor or biographer and subject/victim; *Daisy Miller* (1878) sketches comically, then painfully, an American girl's scandalous fate in Rome; *What Maisie Knew* (1897) is a brilliant novel about the moral journey of a child of divorce, told with quiet rage and a cool irony. In *The Ambassadors* (1903), a masterly comedy of intercultural misunderstanding, we follow the hero Lambert Strether through a morally ambiguous Paris which shimmers for him and us like "a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next." Always his great intelligence about point of view, his immersion of the reader in the experience and often the confusions of his characters, places us vividly with them in their uncertainties as they struggle to interpret and come to terms with their experience.

His works make demands of us, but they equally show or teach the reader how to approach them; they are lessons in interpretation, or in emotional intelligence. Thus late in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) our heroine sees that her betrayer Madame Merle realises she is no longer a dupe: "Isabel noted a sudden rupture in her voice, which was in itself a complete drama. This subtle modulation marked a momentous discovery." Small shifts or breaks of tone can be "momentous" in James: as his career goes on, the energies of melodrama, or of tragedy, increasingly manifest themselves in his fiction without the conventional "great scenes" of confrontation—but none the less thrillingly. Often the most intense passages in James just involve characters coming to realise something life-changing; like Isabel realising how profoundly she has been betrayed, how beneath the calm everyday surface something evil and conspiratorial has been at work, something cold and ruthless:

Now that she was in the secret, now that she knew something that so much concerned her, and the eclipse of which had made life resemble an attempt to play whist with an imperfect pack of cards, the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness. She remembered a thousand trifles; they started to life with the spontaneity of a shiver. That is, she had thought them trifles at the time; now she saw that they were leaden weighted.

This transformative vision, moreover, shows us James the historian of women's apparently undramatic careers, the "hater of tyranny"—finding grandeur in the quiet tragedy of a life, of a heroine deceived and entrapped for the fortune which has been bequeathed her exactly to give her freedom.

James followed his father, an eccentric Swedenborgian philosopher, in deploring cases of "flagrant morality"—the Pharisaical, unreflectively judgmental attitudes of those impatient with nuances of interpretation, with the moral uses of the imagination. Anyone who has done jury duty will have realised how potentially uncertainty or provisionality of judgment arouses terror and rage in those who lack what Keats called "Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason". James's stance, related to the philosophical Pragmatism of his eminent brother William, is quietly persistent, constantly searching and adapting to changing circumstances—and always makes room for more complex understandings, often nameless ones which aren't pinned down with a label. Thus Sir Claude, the weak but sympathetic hero of *What Maisie Knew*, when accused of killing Maisie's "moral sense", makes a stirring defence of the child's loving nature:



"*Holding my candle high, till I came within sight of the tall window*", an illustration by Eric Pape from the serialised printing of "*The Turn of the Screw*", 1898

"I've not killed anything," he said; "on the contrary I think I've produced life. I don't know what to call it—I haven't even known how decently to deal with it, to approach it; but, whatever it is, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever met—it's exquisite, it's sacred."

And at the climax of this awed speech, "sacred" suggests the way in which, at a moment when the traditional comforts of organised religion had been unsettled by Nietzsche, Darwinism, Biblical scholarship, James's formal and moral experiments seek out forms of feeling and belief that will hold regardless, based in a sensitive, imaginative appreciation of human psychology.

Finally, in the age of cultural present-ism, of so many movements, honourable and necessary as they may be, which tend to regard the productions and values of the past as intrinsically corrupt and sinister, James offers a salutary though ambivalent perspective, seeing Western (and no doubt all) civilisation as both a flawed and tragic heritage and a healing if not salvific value. He is far from denying the oppressions and cruelties on which the cultural achievements of our world have been built—but even so appreciates and cherishes the pleasures and consolations they bring. His hero in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), sworn to carry out an anarchist assassination and awaiting his mission, undergoes an aesthetic conversion which drives him to speak out, in a way that seems more relevant than ever in our iconoclastic age, in defence of the accumulated artistic wealth he is politically pledged to destroy. He speaks up for:

... the monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilisation as we know it, based, if you will, upon all the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and the rapacities of the past, but thanks to which, all the same, the world is less impracticable and life more tolerable. ■